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FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

STORY MAGAZINE

"The Romance of the West—
Written with Action"

THE MOON-TRAIL MAVERICK
A SWIFT, BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
by WALT COBURN

TRIGGER-BOSS OF VINEGARROON RANGE
by JOHN STARR

Also

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Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

Lariat
STORY MAGAZINE

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF RANGE WARFARE

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Four-cornered battle blasted Montana—with cattlemen, sheepmen, squatters and gun-slick land hogs locked in shooting war . . . and Buck Rawlins, 7 UP tophand, fighting for a bigger prize than life itself!

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Printed in U. S. A.

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NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE. THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

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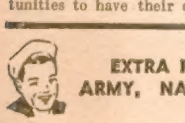

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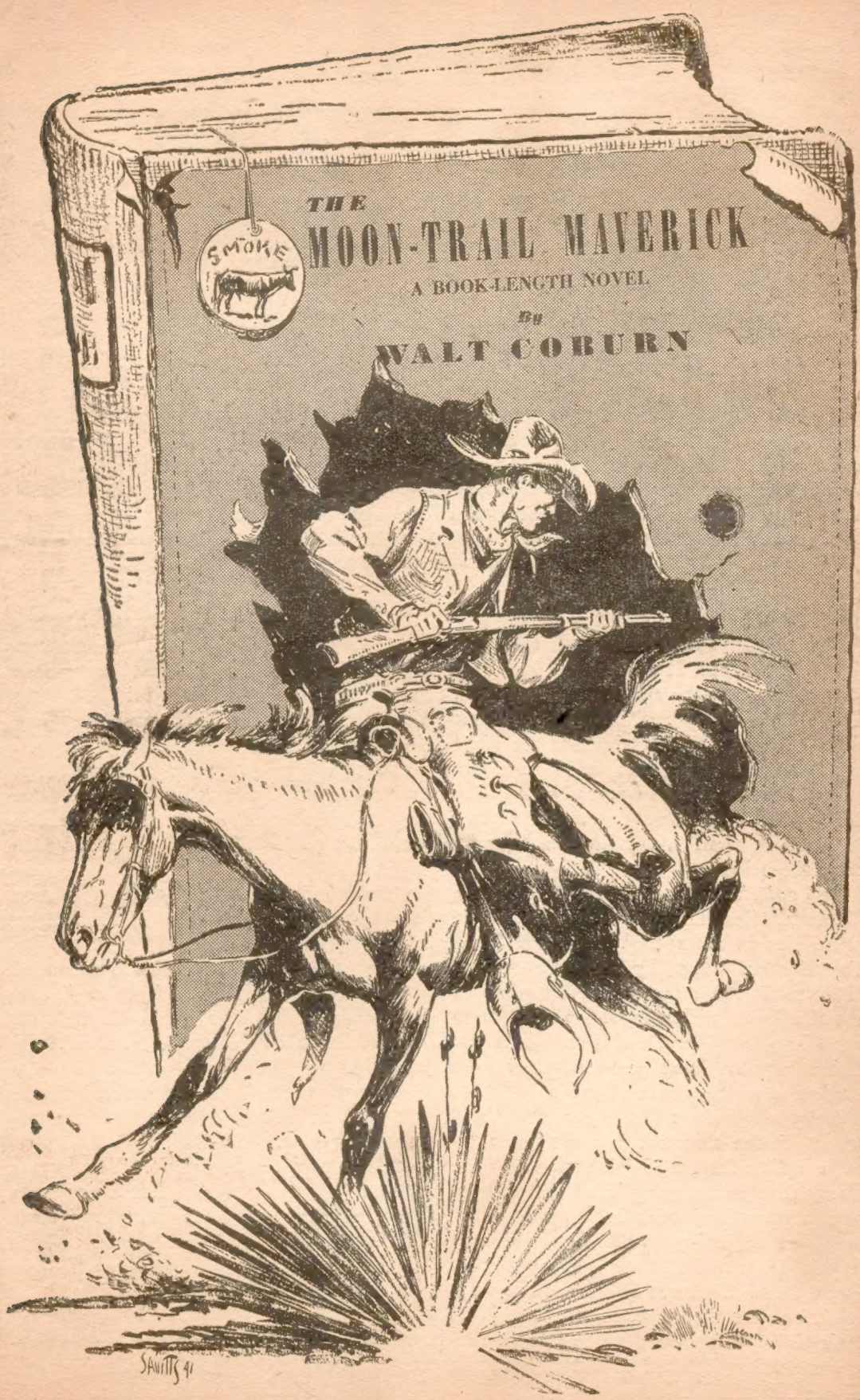

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THE MOON-TRAIL MAVERICK

By Walt Coburn

An empty saddle and a dry-gulched 7 UP waddie told the story . . . hell was loose in Montana. It was four-cornered Range War! Cattlemen, sheepmen, squatters and gun-slick land grabbers rode with sixes and Winchesters to the showdown Armageddon of the West. In the thunder of rolling gunfire each made his last desperate stand—Hook Jones the killer and his coward son, Mazie West who played a lone hand against fate and Buck Rawlins, tophand of the 7 UP who fought for a greater prize than life itself!

WHEN the Nighthawk planned a train holdup, he made a thorough job of it. It was dusk of a chilly May evening, on the east end of the Lodge, Creek Bridge. . . . The Nighthawk chose the month of May because the grass was high in the coulees and the water holes were full. Heavy rains had swollen Lodge Creek so that the trains slowed down to a scant five miles an hour to cross the bridge.

The spot, a few miles east of Chinook, Montana, lies thirty-five miles as the goose flies in the spring, from the Canadian Border. Also, by the same method of reasoning, a stout horse, traveling at a circle lope, will carry its rider southward into the Bear Paw Hills before the Chinook posse have gathered their wits enough to pick up fresh sign.

Relay of fresh mounts lay north and south of the railroad, for the gang always split after a division of the loot. Every man in the gang knew the country as a scholar knows his book.

It was beginning to drizzle. The men in the brush pulled their yellow slickers about them. But not a button was fastened, because they wanted easy access to their Colts. Cigarets were held in cupped hands as they listened to the instructions of the Nighthawk.

"Zeb, you better flag 'er to a stop. Ben and Slim uncouple the express car. Tug and me'll take care uh the engine crew and run 'er acrost the bridge. Shorty and Pat guard the bridge and drop any fool that tries tuh cross it when we pull the express car yonderly. Them as kin swim the crick and git to us, kin have my cut uh the proceeds. A fish couldn't cross Lodge Crick, high as she is tonight.

"Damn this rain, it'll make our sign clear as a sheep trail. Remember, when we scatter, keep to the ridges and rocky country where yuh won't leave much of a trail. Whitey, you and Tex handle the first-class Pullman coach, both uh you boys mind this. No fool shootin'. If some jasper goes fer a smoke-pole, try not tuh hurt him so's he'll up and die on us. All we want is that cash in the express car safe. No killin'.

"Keep yore faces covered. Yonder she comes, cowboys. Git a last draw outa them cigarets and hide yore purty faces under a mask. Light the lantern and git on the tracks, Zeb. Lay low till she stops, gents, then climb aboard."

ABOARD the Pullman, an ebony-hued porter shoved a grinning face into the smoking compartment where

She fired at the retreating horse.

young Buck Rawlins of the 7UP, a newly appointed stock association deputy, and two traveling salesmen were playing a monotonous game of draw poker.

"We's slowin' down for de Lodge Creek Bridge, gemmen. Betta cash in yo' chips, Mista Rawlins, so's I kin bresh yo' off befo' we pulls into Chinook. I'm tendin' to dat lady in lowah six now. Git you-all when you come into yo' section."

The blonde-haired girl in lower six was staring gloomily out the window into the black drizzle. Since dusk, Mazie West had been wishing she were back in New York, doing her "twice a day" at her third from the end, front row position, chorus, of The Prince of Paris. She wrinkled her nose at the grinning porter and sniffed. The train jerked to a stop.

"Another cow on the track, George? Or does the engine need some more water? Or has that fresh brakeman got a heavy date with some girl that lives around here?"

"Rains done made the roadbed soft, Miss."

"This rheumatic engine needs a soft bed."

"Yas'm. I reckon you-all better lemme bresh yo' now, Miss. We lands in Chinook in mighty short time now."

"I hope there's a rowboat handy to take me to the hotel."

"Ah done tole Mistah Buck Rawlins that you-all gittin' off here. He'll take keer uh you, sho' nuff."

"Isn't Rawlins the big, good-looking boy that tried to drink all the hard liquor in Chicago just before he got on the train? Then spent the rest of the time sobering up on a quart per day? He'll be worked to death takin' care of himself. He needs a nurse."

"Shucks now. Missy, that boy kin . . . Lord he'p us!"

The porter's hands shot upward and stayed there. Mazie West smiled wearily at his rolling eyes, then suddenly saw what the trouble was.

A MAN stood at the end of the aisle. A tall man in a big hat and dripping yellow slicker. A black silk handkerchief covered his face save a pair of narrowed eyes. He held a blue-barreled .45 in each hand.

"Take it easy, folks," drawled a voice from behind the handkerchief. "We ain't robbin' nobody in this car. All we're after is some dough up yonder in the express car which the boss an' the boys aims tuh git without no ruckus. Jest keep yore hands in sight an' reachin' sorter upward."

Mazie West cast a quick glance toward the other end of the car. A second masked and slicker-clad man was herding five men down the aisle. Buck Rawlins, grinning easily, walked in the lead, hands elevated. Behind him came the two frightened traveling salesmen and a tall, dapper-looking man with slender blond mustache and shiny hair. Mazie remembered seeing this man get on at the last station.

Lastly came the heavily built, scowling deputy, his new badge shining mockingly in the light. The masked man's .45 was boring into his shoulder blades.

"You three dudes lay down on the floor an' stretch yore arms out ahead uh yuh. You there, Rawlins, take this law officer's gun off him and throw it out the window. No monkey-shines while yo're doin' it, either, Buck."

The hold-up man backed away, gun swinging idly to cover the group. The tall bandit with the two guns leaned against the doorway.

Mazie stole a scared glance at the deputy. His jaws were clamped until the muscles twitched and the light of battle shone in his eyes. Buck Rawlins, unruffled and grinning, was taking the deputy's gun.

"Shoot it out with 'em, Rawlins," whispered the deputy in an undertone. "You got a even break."

Mazie West crouched in her seat, scarcely daring to breathe, her wide gray eyes fixed on Buck's tanned face.

"If I had better than an even break," Buck announced, "I wouldn't shoot. I'm not paid to kill road-agents."

With a careless shrug of his wide shoulders, he tossed the gun through a closed window.

"You—you yellow quitter!" whispered Mazie hoarsely.

Buck, a trifle red, looked around and

down into the girl's tense face.

From outside came the spasmodic sound of rifle shots. The big man in the slicker shifted uneasily on his feet. Then the chugging engine pulled the express car slowly across the bridge into the black night. Somewhere in the Pullman a frightened child was crying.

"Better change your seat, lady," said Buck. "There's somewhat of a draft from that window I just busted." One of his elevated hands lifted his new high crowned Stetson and he bowed mockingly. The bandits chuckled. There were more shots outside.

"AIN'T that there college uh yourn lettin' out early, Buck?" drawled the tall hold-up man.

"Nope. They let me out early, that's all," came the careless reply. "Harvard will get along somehow without me. I was fired."

"The ol' man'll put yuh to ridin' fence fer that. Tell him, when yuh git home, that there's two 7UP saddle hosses trailin' with them Long X broom tails in the Larbe Hills. Hey, you with the hair growed out on yore lip, lay quiet! Yeah. One of 'em's a chunky built brown that looked like ol' Bogus. The other'n is a strawberry roan. Likely lookin' pony."

"Thanks. You boys picked a bad night."

"She was clear as a bell when we left the Bear Paws, damn it all. A man can't figger on too much luck, though. Come mornin' they'll pick up our sign if the rain don't wash it out. But we'll be a long time gone by then. I'm plumb sorry tuh make you lose that there gun, Mister Deputy. Looked like a good 'un. You kin pick it up, come daylight."

"Go to the devil!" growled the officer.

The locomotive was backing up now, shoving the express car. There came a jolting as the train was re-coupled. This was was followed by a shrill whistle.

"If yuh got a bottle along, Buck," drawled the tall man, "feed that porter a big shot. I reckon he's done passed out, he's so scared. Remember us to the boys at the 7UP. Ladies an' gents, *adios.*"

As mysteriously as they had appeared, the two slicker-clad men slid out the doors and then into the wet, dark night.

"You can take your valuables out from behind the seat now, lady," grinned Buck. "The bold, bad men have gone."

"That big gent," muttered the stock detective, "is Tex Arnold. The other one is Whitey Rance."

"And outside are the Nighthawk, Zeb, Shorty, Pat and a few more," added Buck. "But what of it? If I were you, I'd forget it, pardner."

"Forget, hell! I'm leading a posse after 'em when we hit Chinook."

"Yeah? Better stick to your last, shoemaker."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin', my friend, that you're green on the job or you wouldn't make a crack like that. The stock association don't pay their men to cold-trail the Nighthawk."

The traveling salesman and the dapper man with the mustache were on their feet now, brushing dust from their clothes. The latter stepped forward, not unconscious of Mazie's presence.

"Had an automatic in my pocket," he explained, tapping his hip. "But the roughneck saw me when I reached for it. Otherwise, I'd have done something." He adjusted a beautiful lavender tie and cast a sidelong glance at Mazie, who smiled up at him.

"You mighta took a chance, Rawlins," complained the deputy, "when yuh had it."

"Him take a chance?" put in Mazie West scornfully. "Say, he's one of their gang, mister. A blind guy with one eye could see that. Didn't he team with 'em from the rise of the curtain? I'll say he did. You better make a pinch right now, mister, if you're any kind of a wise dick. Here comes the pet of the Mister Great Northern himself and his hand's done up in a bloody rag."

"They're bringin' in a dead man!" gasped one of the salesmen. "A member of the gang."

THE conductor, followed by a group of excited men, pushed into the car. They carried something limp in a dripping yellow slicker. The grin left Buck's lips as he shoved aside the man in the lavender tie and strode down the aisle.

At Buck's heels came the Stock Inspector.

Buck took one look at the blood-smeared features from which a sodden handkerchief had been removed. Then he made his way to the smoking compartment, looking very grave.

"I was hid under the car," boasted the conductor. "Dropped him as he stepped off."

"Tex Arnold," announced the Stock Inspector. "You got him through the back of the head."

"I can name my own run when I get back to St. Paul," chuckled the conductor.

The Inspector was glaring at him coldly. He pulled his coat lapel aside and showed his badge.

"I'll take charge uh the body. Let's have yore gun, mister. It'll be needed at the inquest. And say, when yuh ask fer a new run, put in fer a eastern route, mister. Tex has friends that will shore be rearin' tuh hang yore hide on the fence. They don't like folks that does their killin' from ambush."

Mazie West, listening with both ears, was becoming more bewildered each minute. What manner of men were these Westerners, anyhow? First, a college man, son of the wealthiest cattleman in Montana, to quote the porter, chats with a highwayman. Then an officer sneers at a trainman for shooting one of the bandits.

"To think," she inwardly groaned, "that I gave up a perfectly good job to come out here on a one-way ticket. Chinook, be good to your new farmer!"

The train jerked, then crept along the track at a snail's pace. Mazie took a seat at the far end of the car and stared at the dripping black square of window-pane, tears in her eyes.

Back in the smoking compartment, Buck Rawlins and the Stock Inspector sat beside the stiffening body of the dead bandit. Buck had gotten a sheet from the frightened porter and covered the body that lay on the floor. Thin rivulets of water trickled from the yellow slicker, across the carpeted floor. Buck brought a bottle from his grip and poured his companion a drink.

"I've ridden circle and stood night guard with Tex," he said, in a low tone, "when he was just a big, good-natured cow hand. He deserved a better break at the end, no matter what he's done."

The Inspector nodded. "Wasn't it Tex Arnold that saved that breed kid from drowning in Milk River a year ago last spring, and come damn' near drownin' hisself?"

"Yes."

"Then he killed that tinhorn over a poker hand and joined the Nighthawk."

"The tinhorn had a lot of friends to buy off juries. Yes."

"I done changed my mind about follerin' that bunch with a posse, Rawlins. Here's happy days."

"To old Tex. May he find fat meat in his Shadow Hills. Drink hearty, pardner."

II

TULEY BILL BAKER lit his stub of cigaret and reached for the bar bottle. "As I was sayin'," he told the bartender with an air of solemnity, "this-here jasper down on the Pecos was hell fer experimentin' with cross-breedin'. He's got a one-eyed sandhill crane which he's plumb fond of and calls Henrietta. So he takes a fifty-foot, four-strand rawhide rope an' coaxes Henrietta to set on it, feedin' her on red-eye likker an' jerkie meanwhile. Now what d'yuh reckon come uh that there experiment?"

"A crop uh wallyloo birds," guessed the bartender, who used to ride broncs for ten dollars a head.

"No, sir, Worse'n that. Henrietta wakes the ranch early one mornin' by shore heart-rendin' cryin'. They run out to her nest an' finds her millin' aroun' suthin' speckled. They fights her off with their hats an' gits a squint at this here speckled varmint. It's smokin' of a cigareet an' wears a Chihuahua spur on its off foot. It growed into a man an' the man sets yonder."

"Cutbank Carter?" inquired the barkeep, nodding vaguely.

"Ol' Cutbank Carter. The speckles still shows on his face and hands an' his strawberry roan hair is done slipped some on top, but otherwise he don't look no purtier than he did that mornin' I saw Henrietta peckin' at him."

"Have a drink," suggested the man behind the bar.

"Don't care if I do. Roll outa that chair, Cutbank, and belly up to the mahogany. The house is buyin' one."

He accompanied the invitation with a yip that brought Cutbank's six-foot-three frame out of the big chair with a leap. Blinking, Cutbank's hand groped in the region of his right hip. The bartender promptly slid out of sight behind the bar.

Tuley Bill Baker, short, bald and heavily built, stood leaning idly against the glass cigar case.

"Bust this here seegar glass, big feller," he announced coldly, "and it sets yuh back a year's wages. Quit clawin' fer yore hardware an' have a drink with two white men."

"Yuh danged li'l' ol' cow-hocked, short-backed, knee-sprung idjit!" complained Cutbank nasally. "Yuh like tuh get yorse'f shot up a batch. Settin' up all night with Tex Arnold's corpse done raised hell with my nerves. I bin dreamin' about speerits."

CUTBANK steered a course for the bottle and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Seen ary sign uh the boss, Tuley?"

"She come an' went," lied Tuley Bill easily. "She seen yuh laid out in yonder chair, snorin' plenty. I done told her we'd pull out fer the ranch when yuh got sober enough tuh set that thing yuh call a hoss. She was shore ringy, too. She 'lowed that the Rollin' M didn't pay top wages to broken-down waddies that's so stove-up they can't hold their likker like a white man orter. If I was in yore place I'd mosey on over to the Chinook House an' have a medicine talk with her. Mebbyso you kin keep her from firin' yuh. I dunno."

Tuley Bill winked slyly at the barkeep. Cutbank helped himself to another drink and attempted a grin that was a miserable failure.

"I reckon yo're lyin' plenty. Never knowed yuh to speak the truth when yuh could make a lie do the work. I'm boggin' down here till I git plumb primed tuh leave. Mebbyso a eighteen-year-old gal kin buffalo you, but I'll tell a man that Colleen Driscoll can't turn no whizzer on ol' Cutbank Carter. Not by a damn sight, gentlemen an' feller citizens.

"I'm a rattlesnake, I am. A wolf an' a grizzly! I cut my fust tooth on a gun barrel an' my drink is panther blood. My trade is tamin' bad-men an' I kin scratch the buckin'est hoss that ever crossed the flats."

He gulped another drink and glared about, then his thin, nasal howl rent the air as he once more voiced his toughness and double-barreled nerve.

"I've fit Injuns, hung greasers, licked sheriffs, shot . . . Oh, gosh, we're done fer!"

Cutbank's voice had suddenly shrunk to a thin whisper. He shoved the bar bottle toward the astonished saloon man.

"No, sir, I tell yuh, I ain't drinkin' a dang drop, so yuh needn't go coaxin' me. Tuley kin guzzle the stuff if he's fool enough, but not fer ol' Cutbank. I told the boss I'd—"

"That you'd hit the trail for home early yesterday morning."

The voice, cold and uncompromising, came from a tanned girl in worn riding clothes who stood in the doorway. A wide-brimmed Stetson swung in a small, brown hand and she slapped it against her dust-coated riding breeches.

Colleen Driscoll, slim, athletic, capable, ran the Rolling M horse and cattle outfit for her father, who had been blind for many years. She had a way with men and horses that made both her eager slaves. A mop of jet black, thickly curling hair was cut short for convenience, rather than fashion, but it made her all the more attractive. Dark blue eyes, thickly fringed, looked at you with a disconcerting level gaze. Her nose was short, her chin firm, and the glow of Montana sunsets had put a color in her cheeks that no one could ever mistake for make-up.

Now, as she stood in the doorway of the Last Chance Saloon, frowning with disapproval at these two old cow punchers who loved her as a daughter, she made a ravishing picture.

Buck Rawlins, close behind her, gazed at her half-averted cheek with admiration that bordered on worship.

A few idlers were gathering at the windows and door. Among the crowd

on the sidewalk stood Mazie West and the man with the lavender tie who had been on the train. He was dressed in well-tailored, expensive riding clothes and carried a rolled blueprint map under his arm.

"Our friend Rawlins of the 7UP, Miss West. That's Colleen Driscoll with him."

"They seem to be having the time of their young lives. Do the Western women hang around barrooms, Mister Marley?"

"She seems at home, doesn't she? Product of a select New York girls' school, too, I've heard. We might as well be starting for your new ranch. The roads are a bit rough and I may have to change a tire or two on the way."

"In them swell pants?"

"I was speaking figuratively. My driver does all that sort of thing."

They passed on down the street. Others crowded into their place, peering at the odd scene inside the saloon.

"DARN yore pitcher, Buck Rawlins," growled Tuley, wiping beads of nervous perspiration from his red face as he got off the table. "Yo're the cause uh th' whole dang thing. Me'n Cutbank'll git yuh plenty some day fer this."

"So that's it?" frowned Colleen, turning on Buck. "Just where do you fit into this degrading affair, Buckie boy?"

"Quit calling me 'Buckie boy' and otherwise lay off me. These two old longhorns are loco."

"Give the boys some beer and make mine soda pop," Colleen told the bartender, who had known her since she was a baby and had slipped on a fresh apron in her honor. She turned to Cutbank.

"Did Buck rib you boys into shooting out those lights?"

"Noooo. But he done coaxed us into layin' over in town tuh he'p sit up with Tex's corpse an' lend a hand plantin' him today. He 'lowed Tex was entitled to a swell plantin' an' me'n Tuley was the only two waddies in town. We'd worked with ol' Tex afore he turned bad."

"So he kept my wagon-bosses in town while my two round-up outfits laid up at their camps, doing nothing? Buck Rawlins, your dad is right. You'll never amount to a hill of beans. Instead of settling down and making that grand old man proud of you, you carouse around, get fired from school, and jim up my outfits to bury a train robber. As a success, you're a thorough failure. Then you have the crust to ask me to marry you. You need a governess, not a wife, Buck Rawlins!"

Buck flushed crimson and gazed at the toe of his shop-made boot. With an angry stamp of her foot, the girl turned to walk out, then halted, gazing at an overall-clad young giant who barred her way.

"Look out, Bill Murdock," chuckled the irrepressible Tuley. "Let our boss pass."

"In a minute." Big Bill Murdock, son of Angus Murdock, the sheepman on Wild Horse Creek, looked like some young Scottish chief as he stood there clenching and unclenching his fists. His eyes traveled from Colleen to Buck.

"Howdy, Bill," Buck greeted him. "Thought you were still at Yale."

"Well, I'm not. I thought you were at Harvard, if you want a comeback to your small-talk. I suppose you two have been laughing over your cowman's idea of what you term humor. But if you want my opinion, I'm telling you it was a despicable trick. I'm no sheep lover myself, Rawlins, but I'd figure I'd sunk mighty close to the bottom of the scale of humanity if I wantonly slaughtered them, scared a half-witted, harmless Swede sheepherder, and burned his wagon.

"I might overlook the fact that you destroyed fifteen miles of fence that was on my own land, but I can't forget the sheep and the herder. I'm not going to law, because that's not my way of settling injuries. Pull off your coat, Rawlins, and I'll show Colleen Driscoll that her partner in crime isn't so much of a bully as he thinks he is. Shed that coat, you dirty, sneaking coward!"

III

BUCK RAWLINS, white about the lips, slowly took off his coat and laid it on the bar. Then he stooped and

unbuckled his spurs. These and a short-barreled single-action .45 were laid on the coat.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Bill. But I don't let anybody, much less a sheepherder, call me a sneaking coward. Better slip out the back door, Colleen. This won't be pretty."

"Bill Murdock," snapped Colleen, "you aren't drunk. I hope you haven't gone loco. You two boys cut this out and you, Bill, explain yourself."

"That's hardly necessary under the circumstances," growled Bill, rolling his flannel sleeves to bare his powerful forearms. "The herder recognized a 7UP man and two Rolling M riders in the crowd that tarred and feathered him. Rawlins is right. This won't be any tea party. Better fade out of the picture."

Hot, angry tears welled to the girl's eyes. She was half angry, half frightened. Twice before she had seen Buck Rawlins and Bill Murdock fight.

"Cutbank! Tuley!" she appealed to the two cow punchers. "Stop them!"

"Yes'm," came the uneasy consent. "How?"

Then a big-framed, white-mustached man shoved his way through the fast-gathering mob that blocked the front door. Pinned to his vest was a sheriff's badge.

At his heels strode a tall, raw-boned Negress clad in overalls and a man's shirt. On her head was a battered slouch hat.

"Ike Niland," came in a relieved tone from the bartender, "and Ol' Mary. Them hot-headed young fools'll shore calm down now."

"WHAT'S the rip?" rumbled Ike, the sheriff, pushing between the two would-be combatants.

"Lawzee, Honey," came Old Mary's soft drawl, almost a crooning song as she put a long arm about Colleen's shoulders. "Them young skalawags orter be hoss-whipped, makin' you-all cry. You come along with Ol' Mary, Missy."

She half led, half carried the protesting girl through the side door marked "Ladies' Entrance."

"Now, boys—" The old sheriff smiled in a fatherly manner—"what the dickens ails yuh?"

"Somebody killed a lot of Murdock's lousy sheep," Cutbank put in, when neither Buck nor Bill spoke up. "He aims tuh blame Buck an' the Rollin' M spread."

"Figgered that was it. Yo're shore wrong, Bill. You'd know yuh was, if yuh wasn't on the prod. I don't know who done it, but I bet all I got them two outfits never had a hand in it. That ain't Driscoll's ner Rawlins' way uh fightin' an' you know it, young feller. Now you two young colts shake hands an' we'll all have a drink."

"On the house," came the bartender's hearty seconding. "Bury the hatchet, gents."

Bill Murdock grinned feebly. "I suppose I was somewhat hasty, Buck. I lied when I called you a sneaking coward. Knew I lied when I said it. Shake?"

"You're damn right, Bill. Now let's get the drift of this business."

"Somebody," explained the young sheepman, "cut our new drift fence on Alkalai Creek. Fifteen miles of new fence, all five wires cut between every post. The herder was camped on the creek and heard his dogs bark in the night. Thinking it was coyotes, he stepped to the door of his sheep wagon and fired his Winchester into the air.

"They were on him like a pack of wolves. Tarred and feathered him, killed the dogs and a lot of sheep, then fired his wagon. They wore gunnysack masks, but he recognized Bob Doran of the 7UP and the two Listen boys from the Rolling M."

"I fired Jeff and Jake Listen two weeks ago," said Cutbank. "And it wasn't more'n ten days ago that Bob Doran hit me fer a job. Old man Dave Rawlins had fired him fer usin' a spade bit on a bronc."

A man who stood well back in the crowd wormed his way out and onto the street. He headed for a building with a sign over the door. The sign read, "Creighton Marley, Real Estate. Let me Locate your Homestead."

"Who, then," asked Bill Murdock, "had it in for our outfit bad enough to cut that fence?"

"Perhaps it was someone that wanted to cause trouble between the sheep and

cattle outfits," suggested Buck in a low tone. "The country's full of nesters that look onery enough to pull such a deal."

"Two of 'em located in our horse pasture," added Bill. "Tough-looking babies. If they're farmers, I'm a preacher. Five of the skunks near the Driscoll home ranch and I heard they had made the crack that it would go hard with the man or gang of men from the cow outfits that crossed their lines. It looks to me like they were grafters. Hoboes that moved in here, hoping we'd give 'em a piece of change to move out.

"They all pack guns and have whisky on their places. There's trouble coming, Buck. You may be kept busy, Ike."

"SAY," asked Buck "how come you aren't trailing the Nighthawk, Ike?"

"They sent five men down from Helena on a special train to take up the chase. Wired me to organize a posse and have 'em ready. Uh course, by the time them five man-hunters got here, the trail was shore hard tuh foller account uh the rain washin' out the sign. Now they're sashayin' around the hills like so many stray sheep, most uh the nesters in the posse plumb scared tuh death fer fear they'll jump one uh the Nighthawk's men."

"Who is this Creighton Marley, Ike?" asked Buck.

"He's the dressed-up dude that's locatin' these here nesters on every pinnacle in this section uh the state. Some of it's good land. Some of it won't raise nothin' but greasewood an' boulders, jackass rabbits an' tumbleweeds. They say Marley's loanin' money right an' left to 'em, takin' fust mortgages on their places. Must be loco."

Cutbank and Tuley exchanged a meaning look and Cutbank jogged Buck's elbow.

"Hadn't we better drink this here likker afore she gits stale, Buck?" he suggested.

"The boss'll be showin' up directly," added Tuley Bill.

"And we'll all catch hell again, eh? Here's how. Then let's get old Tex buried." Buck raised his glass.

It was an unobtrusive little procession that bore the rough pine box through a drizzling rain to the graveyard just beyond the town. Cutbank and Tuley, Bill and Buck carried the rude coffin. Carried it on a sling made of their lariats, their horses traveling at a slow walk. Ike Niland rode in the lead, his yellow slicker buttoned tight.

These men, who stood bareheaded in the rain, had, in burying Tex Arnold, cowpuncher, forgotten Tex, the outlaw. It was their way. They knew no other.

Mazie West would not have understood. Nor would the thousands of Mazie Wests and John Wests whose shiny barb wire was being strung across Montana's open range, have understood. How could they who had never ridden all night under the stars, singing to a sleeping beef herd, or fought white death in a blizzard, or grinned carelessly at death in a hundred violent forms, how could they understand the great hearts of the men who looked upon them as invaders?

"So long, Tex, ol' pard," said Cutbank. And the wet sod thudded dully into the grave, crushing the red roses.

IV

COLONEL BOB DRISCOLL sat on the long veranda, his huge armchair tilted against the log wall so that his scarred, white-bearded face caught the last rays of the setting sun. Every evening, the weather permitting, the blind cowman sat thus.

Beyond, on a grassy knoll, stood a little white cross. A white wooden cross that marked the grave inside its picket fence. There lay his wife, the only woman, save his daughter, who had ever seen old Colonel Driscoll's softer side.

Years before, a renegade band of Sioux had quit their reservation and along their blood-spattered trail lay the Driscoll ranch. They had stolen a bunch of his horses, killed his wife, and left him for dead, an ugly hatchet gash across his eyes. But Bob Driscoll was destined to live and care for the infant daughter the marauders had overlooked.

A wild young cowboy, whom Fate was later to turn into an outlaw known as the Nighthawk, took the trail of these renegades, ten in number. He rode into Fort Musselshell five weeks later with four

prisoners. Tied to his saddlestrings were six Sioux scalps. That was one of the reasons that no cowpuncher ever rode in a posse that was after this quick-shooting, hard-riding Nighthawk.

The blind cattleman's quick ears caught the thud of a horse's hoofs.

"That you, Colleen?"

"It sure is, dad. A day late getting back from Chinook but couldn't make it sooner. I'll be back as quick as I get Sapphire taken care of."

She gave her blue roan horse his head and rode to the barn. She was back in a few minutes, perched on one arm of his chair, loading her father's pipe.

"Yuh made the loan at the Valley Bank without trouble, I reckon?" he asked, when he had lit his pipe.

"No, dad," came the reluctant reply, "I didn't. I was going to lie to you about it and keep you from worrying, but I knew you'd drag the truth from Cutbank or Tuley. I couldn't make the loan, dad."

"Wasn't old Hank there?"

"He was. So was that snippy son-in-law of his."

"Snodgrass?"

"Howard Snodgrass. Silk shirt, creased pants, English shoes, and cigaret holder. The idiot. I felt sorry for Uncle Hank. He's simply bullied to death by his wife and daughter and Howard. They were very cordial, had me to dinner, and I played with Maude's two youngsters. But the weather got cool when I mentioned money. Uncle Hank looks worried, too. Howard says they've loaned to the limit and no prospects of getting any money on the notes they hold.

"I reckon we shouldn't blame 'em, dad. If we have a dry summer, as we did last year, beef will be in poor shape. The market shows no sign of bettering either. I'm having White Cloud's bunch rounded up and the bronc fighters will get to work on those three we halter-broke and had to turn loose. There's fifty-odd head of those White Cloud broncs and we may be able to turn them at a decent price. I—"

Colleen broke off suddenly, biting her lip.

"What's the matter, Honey?" He groped for her hand and held it.

"I GOT an offer for White Cloud," Colleen said firmly. "That horseman from Dakota will give a thousand cash for him. It'll help pay round-up expenses."

"Uh-huh," grunted her father, and slowly pulled her into his lap. His hand, passing gently across the girl's cheek, came away wet.

"Uh-huh, we could sell White Cloud. But we won't. If a daughter uh mine was tuh sell a hoss that she'd raised on a bottle an' growed up with, I reckon I'd jest nacherally take that young 'un an' whup her. He's sired some uh the best ponies that ever turned a cow er brung a drunk cowpuncher home of a snowy night. He's about plumb useless now fer a stallion, bein' as we need new stud stock, but ol' White Cloud'd make a shore good pension hoss, hangin' aroun' the lower pasture."

Colleen showered his scarred face with kisses, then nestled in his arms like a child.

"It's grand of you, daddy, to let me keep that white elephant. I hated to see him leave his range. We could trade him to Dave Rawlins for Stardust and he'd be happy over on the 7UP range."

"I'd sooner see my hoss dead than eatin' 7UP grass!" snorted old Driscoll, bristling like an old timber wolf. "Yuh know dang' well I'd shoot that Dave Rawlins on sight if I could see tuh line my sights."

"I forgot," fibbed Colleen, smiling to herself.

It had been five years since those two hot-headed old stockmen had quarreled over some trivial thing. The bitterness in Bob Driscoll's heart had grown with his months of loneliness. The Driscoll ranch house seemed strangely void without the booming laughter of Dave Rawlins, who had visited his old friend Bob with faithful regularity, winter and summer, until that quarrel. More than once, old man Dave Rawlins had made overtures of peace, but the fiery old Colonel would have none of it.

"Buck's back home. Fired from college, dad."

"That's where the college was plumb fortunate an' Montana loses. Keep that young rascal off my range er I'll have

Buck rode with her to safety.

him run off like a sheep-killin' dog, hear me? When I punched cows, they wouldn't let a young idiot like him drag a rope acrost the range. We was cowmen, not college-learnt hellions that think shootin' up towns an' ridin' into saloons is punchin' cows."

"When was Ike here, daddy?"

"Last week. What's that got tuh—"

"You and Ike sure do enjoy gossiping about Buck Rawlins and Bill Murdock and the other young men that ride this range," laughed the girl.

"You thought Buck was about the fastest cowboy north of the Pecos until you and Dave Rawlins quarreled. You won't let Bill light within shooting distance of the Rolling M because his dad raises sheep. Dad, if you keep on this way, you'll be a cranky old man."

"And you are gittin' dadblamed sassy, young lady."

"You'll weaken, you wonderful old fraud. You're like one of these summer storms. All thunder and no lightning. Besides, if you spank me you don't get a word out of me about the hold-up."

"EH?" snorted old Driscoll. "What's that?"

"The Nighthawk struck again at the railroad. Second time in the last year. Gosh, that man's a good hater, dad."

"He figgers he has cause tuh be. From a kid, he was stubborn thataway. They'll cut him down one uh these days, pore devil."

"They got Tex Arnold. Remember Tex?"

"Soft voice? Usta sing Sam Bass of an evenin' at camp? That the gent? Wore bell spurs?"

Thus did the blind cattleman, out of his life of everlasting night, tabulate a man whose face he had never seen. Colleen nodded.

"I rode as far as the Red Barn with Mary," Colleen went on. "She didn't invite me to stop there, so I came on. But I'd have given a new hat to get a look at the man who owned a sweat-marked bay gelding that was in Mary's corral."

"Ol' Mary," said old Driscoll sternly, "is as good a woman as I ever knowed, and down in Texas, where I was raised among em, I've knowed some shore white 'uns. The only thing black about Mary is her hide, Honey. But don't never go visitin' the Red Barn, savvy? It's her business if she runs a saloon an' stage station an' lets some hard citizens hang aroun' there. Mary kin handle, 'em. But it ain't no place fer a girl."

"I've never stopped there, Dad. Mary never would let me. But I'm dying to get a look at the Nighthawk's face and I bet a new pair of boots that was his horse in the corral. A man that can hate as bitterly as he hates the railroad people must make a grand lover."

"If I didn't know you was as level-headed as a well broke work mule, I'd be scared yuh'd try tuh run off with some gent like that. Yuh talk like a school kid but act like an old hand at a round-up."

"Level-headed as an old mule. Aren't you a flatterer, though?" Colleen's bantering tone belied a look of wistful yearning that filled her eyes.

She was gazing across the distant hills, bathed in the gold dust of sunset, toward the 7UP ranch. When a girl has to manage an eighty-thousand-acre ranch, it leaves her little time for romance. Colleen, fresh as a full blown rose, yearned for that romance that was her birthright.

She looked down at her shabby riding

breeches and dusty boots. It had been weeks since she had worn any of the flimsy, fluffy frocks that hung in her closet. Now, swept by a quick wave of loneliness for lights and laughter and gay crowded places, she bit her lip to keep back the tears.

"What's wrong, Honey?" asked her father.

"Wrong? Wrong? Nothing, daddy." She fought to keep the bitterness from her voice. "I'm going in to get ready for dinner. I want to see what I look like in a skirt."

She gave his flannel-clad shoulders a quick squeeze and kissed him on top of the head.

"Maude Snodgrass was saying she hadn't seen me in anything but pants for the past year. She thinks I'm a mess, anyhow, and because I jolly her smirking fashion-plate of a husband, she's jealous and makes comical cracks about my clothes. But we should worry, eh, dad?"

Old Driscoll snorted angrily. "I'd like to see her run a cow outfit like you do."

"Exactly, dad," came Colleen's dry reply. "That's the idea, to a gnat's ear."

A few minutes later there came the splashing of water and the girl's voice raised in frivilous song.

Along the road, kicking up a dust cloud, came an automobile. It snorted to a halt and from it emerged a man in tailored riding clothes.

"Mister Driscoll," he announced himself, "I'm Marley. Creighton Marley. Dropped in for a minute to have a little chat about that three hundred and twenty acres of bottom land you hold on Sand Creek. It is, at present—ah—I say, now!"

Marley was staring at a vision that had suddenly appeared in the doorway. A vision of cherry red chiffon. No butterfly, emerging from its dusty cocoon, ever made a more startling appearance.

"How do you do, Mister Marley. Dad, this is the gentleman whom I told you I met at the Snodgrass dinner a few weeks ago," she explained as she gave the visitor a cool, brown hand and motioned him to a chair.

"The land shark?" growled Driscoll. Marley squirmed.

"The man who opened the land office, dad. Sharks are either fish or pawnbrokers. You'll stay to *supper,* Mister Marley. It's supper, not dinner, out here in the uncouth West, you know."

"Thanks, awfully," he nodded. "I'd be glad to stay. By the way, I just let a farm to a girl—a pretty blonde."

Something that sounded like a snort came from old Bob Driscoll. Marley reddened. He reached for a cigaret.

Another faint, snorting sound came from old Driscoll, who rather prided himself on the fact that he had never gone to school in his life.

"Colleen," he rumbled, without moving his head, which was turned from them, "suthin's afire."

"I think," she replied, "that it's Mister Marley's cigaret that you smell."

"Ever try chawin' tuh break yourse'f uh them ready-rolled things, young feller?"

"One of dad's stock jokes," smiled Colleen sweetly. "He always pulls it on everyone. Where did you locate the blonde?"

"Above the Rawlins ranch, on the creek. Lovely spot."

"But the 7UP owns every foot of the creek, including the spring?"

"So Rawlins imagined," nodded Marley. "But there's been a mistake made in the old filing. Mazie West's three hundred and twenty takes in the 7UP spring and first water rights."

"What?" Old Driscoll was on his feet, fists knotted. "Yuh say somebody squatted on the 7UP springs? It kain't be done!"

"But it has been done," insisted the land man coolly.

"Young feller," said old Bob Driscoll hotly, "I was with Dave Rawlins when he took that big spring, some years afore you was born. Hester Rawlins, Dave's wife, planted with her own hands, the roses that grows at the edge. That was after me'n Dave an' two cowboys stood off a Gros Ventres war party on that spot.

"I don't give a hoot what the land office maps say, Marley, savvy? All I know is that Dave an' Hester Rawlins crossed many a hundred mile uh Injun country tuh git to that spot and they settled there. Yuh ner no other damned

slick-tongued skunk kin cheat ol' Dave outa it. Now git in that rattlin' thing that brung yuh here an' git offen my place. I've heered a plenty about you an' yore ways uh doin' business, yuh dang dude-mannered he-woman! Honey, fetch me my scatter gun."

MARLEY, red and hot with anger, looked at the girl. Colleen was laughing.

"It's lucky for you that you are an old man and a blind man," snapped Marley. "I'm not in the habit of being insulted."

"It's lucky fer you, young feller, that I'm blind. Otherwise I'd squirt yuh offen the place. Git, afore I set the houn's on yuh!"

"Look here," blurted Marley. "Nobody can use that tone with me and get away with it. I won't stand for it."

"Just what," inquired Colleen easily, "do you intend doing about it, Mister Marley? If you get within arm's reach of dad, he'll just simply pick you apart to see what makes you run. You came here, primarily, to tell father that those roughnecks that you located across the ridge on Sand Creek are there to stay and that the law will punish anyone who puts those five men off their homesteads.

"You are armed. Your chauffeur is armed and ugly looking. You intended to bully a blind man, didn't you, Mister Marley? Then you saw me in this dress and thought you'd go at it from a new angle. Flatter the poor little ranch girl who dresses up to eat her evening meal with her blind daddy. Kid her along with your manners of a polished gentleman, and later make love to her. I know your sort."

Marley, his handsome face suffused with anger, stood with clenched fists.

"Two of the boys are just riding in, Mr. Marley," said Colleen. "If I should happen to call them over, I'm afraid you'd get mussed up some and your plug-ugly driver would get some of the toughness drug out of him. The road you followed to get here will take you back. Use it, please. And your next visit will be construed as plain trespassing and treated as such. Good day, Mr. Marley."

"I'm not letting this insult pass," spoke Marley, his voice thick with anger. "I'll make you and your father pay for this."

"Spoken like the villain of the piece, word for word. Now bow yourself out of the scene, please. Dad's getting restless."

"The young coyote," growled old Bob Driscoll.

"Yes. Coyote is the word, dad. But even coyotes can make trouble." And Bob Driscoll's sightless eyes could not see the troubled look on her face.

V

DAVE RAWLINS . . . Tall, leathery, snow-white hair and mustache, and a pair of keen gray eyes that looked from under shaggy brows. His flannel shirt needed mending, his overalls were warped to the shape of long, hard-muscled legs. The silver-mounted spurs on his glove-fitting boots jingled a little as he strode to the door of the 7UP bunk-house to greet the young cowpuncher who stood, hesitating a little, smiling uncertainly.

"Howdy, Buck," said Dave Rawlins gravely. "Welcome home." He held out a strong, brown hand.

"How are yuh, dad?" Buck gripped the proffered hand and the two men, father and son, their eyes on a level, eyes of the same gray, looked at one another. Then a sudden smile wrinkled the leathery face of the old cowman. He swung his left fist into Buck's ribs with a force that made the younger man grunt. He slapped Buck between the shoulders and then poked a thumb in his ribs.

"So they fired yuh out uh that fancy college, did they?" He chuckled. "Couldn't make a dude outa the material they had tuh work with, huh? What did yuh do, yuh young idiot? Shoot the lights outa their schoolhouse?"

"Not quite that bad. I spanked a professor for calling me dumb. But he was right, at that. I wasted your money trying to get educated. I'm a bum, dad."

"Yo're a good cowhand," said Dave Hawlins grimly, "and we need good cowhands right now. I was goin' to wire for yuh to come home, but you beat me

to it. The boys are rearin' to see yuh. Come on in."

Buck was hoorawed by the cowboys about having been away to a dude school back East. They fired questions at him and he gave them replies that brought gusts of laughter.

IT was half an hour before Buck and his father got away and walked together toward the corrals. There, with backs against the log corral, squatting on spurred boot heels, they talked.

"I didn't seem to fit in back there at the university, dad. They didn't talk my language and I couldn't ketch onto their ways. It was like being in prison. I'm not making excuses, understand. I had no business being fired. You'd spent good money to send me there."

"You earned the money, son. Supposin' we forgit it? I'm proud tuh have yuh home, that's all. Mebbyso, ridin' out here, you seen what's goin' on Buck, things is beginnin' to tighten. Nesters are swarmin' in by the hundreds, locatin' dry land farms on every ridge and in every coulee. They're stringin' barb wire acrost the old round-up trails and plowin' up the old bed grounds. They're a-turnin' Montana grass side down.

"It's the finish here of the cattleman. And while I'd bet my last bottom dollar that they'll starve out in five years, still they're stickin' their plow share plumb into the heart of the cow country. Even if they're doomed to fail, still that don't help us. We gotta pull stakes and drift yonderly."

"You mean sell out here, dad?"

"Sell out?" Dave Rawlins' eyes hardened. "We can't sell. Nobody will buy. Without free range, there's no money in this cow business today. And the nesters are locatin' every acre of free range. Range that the big outfits have claimed since before you was born is no longer ours. Even some of the land we thought we had title to ain't ours. These smart land locaters have looked up old records and found where the titles are not clear. Without givin' us a chance to clear them titles, they're puttin' in these squatters and homesteaders. Some of the homesteaders are honest farmers, poor devils. Others are a bad lot, little better than tramps."

"There'll be trouble, then?"

"Looks thataway, Buck. Us old-timers ain't goin' to run from a pack like that. We crossed the plains in the early days, fought off Injuns and drought and blizzards to trail cattle here from Texas. We raised our families here. You was born on this ranch, Buck. Yore mother is buried here. We've had good times and hard times together, us old-timers. It shore hurts to see this old country cluttered up with barb wire.

"We're too old, most of us, to hunt new range. We'd always figgered on spending our last days here, peaceful and happy, while you younger boys take up the job where we laid down our hands. But I reckon it ain't in the cards. We gotta go on fightin' to hold what's bin ours fer forty years."

"It all had to come some day, dad." Buck was also looking across the hills toward the mountains. "That's always the way of things. Frontiers are pushed back. Settlers come and make farms out of the big ranges, and then, after a few years more, towns build up into cities. There are factories and big stores and automobiles traveling the roads where the wagons of the pioneers blazed the way. That's civilization, dad. That's life. It had to come."

"They come here and squat on my land," said Dave Rawlins without heat, "They butcher my beef, set their dogs on my cattle, run off my horses, steal what they kin lay their hands on. Last week I sent a freight outfit to town fer grub. The boys git stuck in the mud and drop the trail wagon. Two days later they go back to fetch it and find nothin' but the empty wagon. The sons had even took the axle grease and wrench outa the jockey box. Is that civilization, son?"

Buck shook his head.

"There's bound to be thieves among any class of men, dad."

"Not that kind of a thief. I've knowed road agents and cattle rustlers and hoss thieves, but none of 'em would rob a wagon stuck in the mud. Not even the lousiest 'breed on the reservation would take stuff he didn't need. He might he'p

hisself to a few cans uh corn er a sack uh flour, but he wouldn't gut the whole load. If that's the kind uh folks that's aimin' tuh farm this country, they'll deserve what they'll git."

"I saw Bill Murdock in Chinook," said Buck. "He says that some gents scattered a bunch of their woolies and beat up his herder. Then they burned the sheep wagon. Bob Doran and the two Listen boys was with 'em. Bill jumped me about it. Thought our outfit and some of the Rolling M boys had done it. I'm wondering just how many are in this gang that are getting tough."

"Plenty many, if yuh ask me. And somebody higher up is grub-stakin' 'em."

"That's what I heard, but I didn't hardly believe it. I stopped at Old Mary's for dinner. She gave me both ears full while I ate my fried chicken. But her say-so is just what she got from The Nighthawk. He lays it onto the railroad companies. Naturally, he would."

"And mebbyso he's right. For all his hatin', he's got a long sight into things."

"The railroad is instrumental in getting a lot of these settlers in here," admitted Buck, "but they're not petty enough to hire a bunch of toughs to start a thing like that. Nope, dad, we'll have to look on further. Find out who pays this man Creighton Marley and we'll be getting somewhere."

"Mebby. Mebbyso. Who's that a-comin' yonder in that spring wagon? Looks like that dry-lander from over on Big Warm. It is, too."

"That's one of our horses with the empty saddle that he's leadin' behind," said Buck rising. "It's that Cherry horse."

"Joe Phelps rode him away this mornin'. He was goin' over to the reservation to fetch home some stray horses old Set 'em High found over on Peoples Crick. Somethin's wrong, Buck."

In silence Buck and his father waited for the farmer, a big red-faced, blue-eyed Swede, to drive up.

"Howdy, Nelson," said Dave Rawlins. "Where'd yuh find that horse?"

Carl Nelson nodded toward something in his wagon covered by a tarp.

"One of your men, Rawlins. I found him at the gravel crossing up above my homestead. He's dead. Shot in the back. His horse was tied to a tree near there. There's been black murder done."

VI

A 7-UP cowpuncher was dead. Murdered. Blood had been spilled and that spilled blood was as if the nesters had declared open warfare.

The gray eyes of Dave Rawlins were hard and merciless as they surveyed the nester who had fetched home the body of Joe Phelps.

"Nelson," he said bluntly, "how much do you know about the killing?"

The big farmer returned the cattleman's stare. "Nothing. I was on my way home. My team shied at something in the brush at the creek crossing. I investigated and found the dead cowboy. The brand on his horse told me he was one of your men so I brought the body here."

"The crossing's about a mile above yore place. Anybody at your place hear a shot?"

"There was nobody home at my place, Rawlins. My wife and two daughters are in Chinook filing on their homesteads."

Dave Rawlins stepped over to the wagon. He lifted the tarp and looked at the dead man beneath, then gently dropped the cover again. Now he picked up a shotgun from the wagon bed. Nelson scowled, but said nothing as the cowman broke the weapon and sniffed the twin barrels.

"Ain't you the farmer they call 'Deacon'?"

"I am. By calling, I'm a minister of the gospel."

"Hmm. Yo're the first sky pilot I ever knowed that packed a gun."

"The gun does not belong to me," said the big farmer. "Are you trying to connect me with this murder?"

"I'm tryin' to find out why Joe Phelps was killed and who killed him. Here's yore gun. Keep it. Joe wasn't killed by a shotgun, nohow. I was just wonderin' why a parson went around with a gun in his wagon."

"If you want the truth about the gun," said Deacon Carl Nelson, his blue eyes

bright with fire, "I took it away from a neighbor of mine for fear he might use it to kill certain cowboys who have been annoying my two daughters with their unwelcome attentions. My oldest girl is promised in marriage to an honest, sober, God-fearing farmer. Twice, while I have been gone, these ruffians, drunk and profane of manner, have ridden to my place. My wife and daughters have become badly frightened.

"Louise, my eldest daughter, foolishly confided her fears to Eric Swanson, her future husband. Eric, being young and hot-tempered, rashly threatened to shoot the next man who annoyed them. To prevent bloodshed, I took away Eric's only weapon.

"Who were these cowboys that bothered yore women-folks?" asked Dave Rawlins grimly.

"One of them rode a horse branded 7UP. Eric met them once. I don't know their names."

"My men all have orders to stay away from every nester's place. I'll fire the first 7UP man that open's a scissor-bill's gate. Either this Eric lied or I've got snakes on my payroll. And I don't know of a man on my ranch I can't trust."

"Eric is not a liar, Rawlins. He said one of the men rode a 7UP horse."

"The horse might have been stolen." Buck put in. "Hadn't we better unload poor old Joe?"

FATHER and son lifted the cowboy's body from the spring wagon. Nelson looked at the cowman with steady eyes, when Dave came back from the bunk-house where they had carried the corpse.

"Rawlins, I am afraid this is the beginning of something very serious. This may precipitate trouble."

"I dunno about that, Nelson, but whoever killed Joe Phelps is shore gonna pay for it. How much do I owe yuh for fetchin' Joe home?"

"You owe me nothing but your hand in friendship, Rawlins."

Dave Rawlins shook his head. "When I'm satisfied in my own mind that yo're right, I'll shake hands. Not till then. We didn't ask you nesters to come onto our range. You don't fit in with what we call Montana. When men like you begin to clutter up the country, us cow folks has to move on. Buck says that's the way uh things, and mebbyso he's right. But just now, while us old-timers is swallerin' the pill, she tastes almighty bitter. If I shook hands now, I'd be lyin' to you and to myse'f."

"I think I understand," said the farmer, running a calloused hand through the corn-colored hair that was generously sprinkled with gray. "I'll wait, Rawlins. I have always tried to be patient. I will pray for the day to come when the farmers and the cattlemen shall be friends."

Dave Rawlins smiled faintly. "That day is too far ahead fer me to ketch sight off, deacon. Will yuh stay for supper?"

"I'm afraid I can't thanks, under the circumstances. But before I go, I'd like you to believe that I will do all in my power to bring the murderer of that cowboy to justice."

"What if yore Eric feller is the one?"

"If Eric Swanson killed that man, he will give himself up to the law. But I know that Eric is innocent, because whoever did the crime is a coward and Eric is no coward. Good day to you, Rawlins."

"So-long, Nelson. You talk like a white man, darned if yuh don't. Still, the worst trimmin' I ever got in a hoss trade was from a slick-talkin' camp-meetin' preacher down in Kansas. So, outside uh Brother Van and Father De Smet, both old-timers here, I never took much stock in sky pilots. Neither one uh them is hoss traders. Well, good luck to yuh, anyhow, deacon. And we're obliged to yuh for fetchin' Joe Phelps home. Joe was a mighty fine boy."

DAVE RAWLINS watched the farmer drive away into the dusk. Then he turned and walked slowly back to the bunk house. Tall, stiff-backed, stern-visaged, uncompromising. Shoved in the waistband of his overalls was an old cedar-handled six-shooter. Buck met him just outside the bunk-house door.

"One of the boys is going to town for the sheriff, dad. Joe would want to be buried here on the ranch, I reckon.

As I came along the road, I saw a tent pitched near the big springs. Who is camped there?"

"Nobody as I know of, Buck."

"I thought I saw Marley's car leaving there. I'm riding over to see if that crook has had the gall to locate one of his ignorant nesters there at the spring. It don't seem likely, but I'm riding over."

"That spring belongs to us, Buck. Nobody kin locate there."

"I know that. I'll move 'em on."

"Go careful, son. No ruckus, mind."

"I'll keep my head, dad, don't worry."

Dave Rawlins rightly guessed that Buck's primary reason for riding the five miles to the big spring, known as 7UP Springs, was to ride off something of the grief he felt over Joe's death. Joe had worked for the Rawlins outfit for ten years, and had taught Buck many things that a cowboy must learn. Buck had always been mighty fond of Joe Phelps.

So it was with a heavy weight in his heart that Buck Rawlins, riding a fresh horse, rode through the purple dusk to the lighted tent pitched at the 7UP Springs. Mingled with that grief was resentment against the nesters.

But there was nobody inside the tent, nobody to give reply to his quiet-voiced, "Hello, there!"

Buck shifted his weight to one stirrup and his hand dropped to the butt of his six-shooter. It might be an ambush of some sort. Then a woman's voice, raised in a cry of startled fear, made him start. The cry came from a hundred yards away, where the wild rose bushes grew in a sweet-scented thicket.

"Help! Oh, help!"

And a man's gruff voice, blotting out the girl's. "Shut up, you little fool!"

BUCK jumped his horse into motion. A few moments and he was on the ground, jerking roughly at the bulk of a man who held a struggling, fighting girl in his arms.

The man let go the girl in khaki camping clothes and smashed a heavy fist into Buck's face.

"Right back to yuh," gritted Buck through split lips, and he swung a clean hook into the bigger man's mid-section. He followed the hook with a couple of swift, vicious jabs, then sidestepped the other's bull-like rush. Now he stabbed wicked lefts into the big fellow's face. It was too near dark to see much. But Buck was fighting with a boxer's science, timing every blow.

He was dimly aware of the blonde-haired girl in khaki breeches and flannel shirt, as she danced up and down, panting inane encouragement. Now Buck measured the other man. He led the big fellow into a blind rush, balanced himself, and swung a long, swift, accurate left. The man went down like a felled beef as Buck's fist thudded against the point of his jaw. Buck rubbed his bruised knuckles and grinned through a smear of blood.

"I don't know just how you got here, lady, or what you are doing here, but if you'll fade out of sight for about five minutes, I'll give this squatter the good old bum's rush. Then we'll see about getting you to town where you belong."

"Omigosh! The boy bandit in person! The train robbers' stage manager in a new role! With all the vast wide-open spaces to pick from, I had to draw somethink like you for this mellerdrammer. Well, it's just some more of my bad luck, that's all. Where's your gang?"

"I left them at the robber's cave picking their teeth with bowie knives. What in Sam Hill are you doing here, anyhow?"

"I'm homesteading, brother. Can't you tell by my trick costume that I'm a farmerette? I think the boy friend there is coming awake."

"He is." Buck stepped quickly to the side of the man and kicked the fellow's groping hand away from the gun he was after.

"I'll take the artillery, mister. And I'll give you just about one minute to vamoose. I'm not in a good humor right now and us cow folks are putting a bounty on skunks of your breed, so you'd better hightail it while you're all in one piece."

"Who are you, anyhow?" growled the man, rising. "What right you got to gimme orders?"

"Unless you want worse than you got in the first dose, git!"

The big man lurched toward his horse

"Right back at ya!" Buck grunted.

and climbed stiffly into the saddle.

"You ain't won this yet. I know yuh now. Yo're young Rawlins. No, you and yore old man ain't winnin' much. I'll be back."

"When you come, come heeled. Drag it, you big bum!"

BUCK waited until the man had gone, then turned again to the girl.

"Who is that big tramp, anyhow?"

"I was about to ask that, myself."

"I'll throw his tent and stuff over in the coulee, then I can take you on to the ranch for tonight. Too late to get you to town tonight."

"The tent is mine," said Mazie West. "I've located here. I've a notion Marley sent that heavyweight out to see that I wasn't bullied. But the big false alarm was tight and bent on making moonlight love. I'm all right now, thanks. How late do these wolves and coyotes keep up their dirge?"

"You mean," said Buck slowly, "that Marley located you here at these springs?"

"He sure did. And I'm staying located, too."

Buck smiled a little and wiped the blood from his mouth. "We've owned these springs since '81, lady. Marley has located you on the wrong homestead."

"Not according to the map I have from the land office, he didn't. I'm stick-

ing here till a court injunction or whatever it is, moves me on. You can't bluff me, mister."

"I'm not bluffing you, lady. I'm in no mood for arguing, either. And outside of the fact that the land is ours, you can't stay here."

"Who's running me off? You?"

Buck shook his head. "You're alone here. You're at the mercy of every tough that happens to ride this way. Men like that big hunk of meat that just rode away. You don't savvy what you're up against. Pack your duds and climb on behind me. I'll take you to the ranch where you'll be safe."

"You don't seem to get the big idea, cowboy. I'm staying right here. I got a gun at the tent. I'm not scared. Again, thanks for giving that big bad wolf the hook. And good night."

"You can't stay here, hang it!"

"Try to put me off and I'll call the law. I know all about the Rawlins outfit. You're in with that gang of outlaws and you think you can run the country. Well, I'm not running. Wrap that up with your tobacco and smoke it. Good night."

Abruptly, she turned away and strode quickly to her tent. Buck reined his horse and rode back toward the ranch. His exasperation gave way to a grin. He admired the girl's grit. Well, he'd fix her.

Back at the ranch Buck routed an undersized, very bald-headed, astonishingly weasened old cowpuncher from his blankets.

"Onion," said Buck softly, "I got a great job for yuh. How'd you like to ride herd on a pilgrim girl for a few days? There's a darn fool female camped at 7UP Springs. She thinks she own it. She's yaller-haired and pretty as a valentine. Honest. All you have to do is sit on the hill and throw lead at anybody that bothers her. It's your job, whether you want it or not. It's the chance of a lifetime for a heart buster like you, Onion."

VII

FOUR men sat around a poker table at Old Mary's road ranch. On the table stood a bottle of whisky. In front of each man was a small glass. The tall man with the straight features and the black hair, patched snowy white around the ears, was dividing a stack of yellow-backed banknotes into seven equal piles. From the kitchen came the savory odor of frying chicken and the whisky-husky voice of Old Mary singing Sam Bass.

"Posses," said a short, heavy-shouldered man with a two-weeks' growth of sand-colored whiskers, "is about the foolishest things, regardless. Them boneheads is millin' all over the Bear Paws right now, like so many unbroke bird dawgs."

He shook his head.

"Quit a-runnin' off at the head, Shorty," drawled a lanky man who could never have come from any other state but Texas, "kain't yuh see the boss is bogged down with figgerin'?"

The dark man who was dividing the money smiled a little. He quit sorting the banknotes and his eyes, hazel-colored, neither gray nor brown, took in the other three with an amused and friendly glance. Time had been when this man had been known as Wade Hardin, cowboy. Now they called him The Nighthawk. In spite of the fact that he was as dangerous a man as ever rode the outlaw trail, there was a perceptible softness in his make-up.

"Zeb," he said in a quiet, rather weary tone of voice, "you was closer to Tex Arnold than any of us. It'll be up to you to see that Tex's share goes to his kin-folks. Reckon you can round 'em up?"

"There's only a kid sister down yonder, Wade. I'll see she gits it."

The Nighthawk nodded and finished dividing the money. When each man had taken his allotted share, when Zeb had wrapped Tex Arnold's cut in a silk neckscarf and shoved it in his pocket, when the Nighthawk had taken the two odd piles of money and laid them carefully to one side, he reached for the bottle and filled each empty glass.

Even as he finished that ceremony, there came the thud of shod hoofs, outside. Now the jingle of spurs. Muffled voices sounded out in the barroom. Each man at the table in the card room had

a gun in his hand. Four pairs of slitted eyes watched the closed door that led into the short hallway to the saloon.

THE door opened, neither slowly nor quickly. And in the open doorway stood a lanky, leatherly-faced man whose mouth was partly hidden by a drooping red mustache. His left arm had long ago been amputated between the elbow and wrist and in place of the missing forearm and hand was a wooden stump to which was fastened a sharp pointed hook. His greenish eyes surveyed the outlaws with glittering brightness. They relaxed, sheathing their guns.

"Come in outa the draught, Hook," invited The Nighthawk. "What fetches yuh here?"

"Bad news, Nighthawk. There's a big posse headed this way. Mostly farmers, but a good-sized sprinklin' uh tough men that are squattin' on the best land hereabouts. Hired squatters, most likely, gathered because they are hard and will drift on later, relinquishing their land to some gent that's got plenty of dough to buy 'em off."

"It's the railroads that's hirin' 'em," said The Nighhawk, his voice brittle with sudden anger. "It's the big railroads that shoved these men in here to rob the cowmen. The railroads is payin' these skunks now to hunt me down for the bounty that's on my hide. Let 'em come. I'm ready. A man could kill a hundred of 'em and not git a one worth two-bits Mex money."

"You shore do hate these railroad folks," grinned Hook Jones. "I never heard how come you had it in fer 'em."

"And mebbyso yuh never will learn, Hook. It's my personal affair. While I live, I'll deal 'em misery. Some day, mebbyso, they'll hang me or shoot me, but while I'm alive, I'll do my best to hamstring 'em. Let 'em bring on their posse. I'm ready."

Hook helped himself to a drink. "*Mightn't* it be a better idee to run some, just now? Shootin' it out with them imported gents will buy yuh nothin'. There's plenty for us boys to do here, but it has got to be done keerful. A lead-th'owin' party here at Mary's ain't doin' nobody but the coroner any good. I come past the 7UP ranch this mornin'. They're plantin' pore ol' Joe Phelps today. Joe got murdered yesterday."

"Joe Phelps? Who done it, Hook?"

"*Quien sabe?* He was shot in the back at the gravel crossin' on Big Warm. Dave Rawlins is mighty upset, and so is Buck. It won't take much more to start another war like that 'un we know about over in Wyoming. Me, I'd hate to see it come. I don't want trouble. I'm doin' good over on my little place. The missus ain't ever bin the same since that Wyoming ruckus. The sound of a gun goin' off skeers her somethin' pitiful. She's never fergot how her two brothers was called to the door and shot down. How she drug their bodies inside and held off them devils with the rifle till I come, at daylight. Her hair had bin black as an Injun's till that night. In a month she was white-haired. That's what it done to her. I don't dast pack a gun."

THE Nighthawk nodded. "I reckon we owe you that much, and a heap more, Hook. What you say now, goes. We'll drag it for the breaks. You know the cabin in the scrub pines."

The others nodded assent. Every man in that room knew Hook Jones for what he had been ten and fifteen and twenty-five years ago. When he had two hands and when his name had not been Jones. When he had been one of that secret fraternity who rode the outlaw trail.

They knew the tale about how he had ridden into Wyoming to help a man who was his friend. How he had done his share of fighting in one of the bloodiest cattle wars this country had ever known. How he had married the sister of the friend who had been killed, and had taken her, half demented, away from the blood-spattered Johnson County.

And they knew how his one and only son Guy, now nearing manhood, was a coward who preferred books to steers, and whose mildness of manner was meek, rather than manly. He devoted much of his time to study and at the country school where the boys and girls of the cow country rode to learn their three R's, Guy Jones was rated far above the others in mentality. He had a decided leaning toward drawing pictures and painting things

on cardboard. He had never had a fight with other boys, even when they plagued him without mercy. So they called him a coward.

But there was one who had never called Guy Jones a coward. That one person was Buck Rawlins. Buck Rawlins, who claimed no virtues, whose manner of living was untamed. Buck Rawlins, the best rider, the fastest roper, the best all around cowpuncher in the Little Rockies section of the cow country, was Guy Jones' champion. As unalike as black is from white, Buck Rawlins and Guy Jones. And yet, between them, there was a bond of comradeship and understanding.

NOW Hook Jones drank with The Nighthawk and his men, there at Old Mary's road ranch. And half an hour later the big, rawboned Negress was alone there at her place. There was no indication that the outlaws had been there. But the posse of men who rode up to Mary's place were ugly and abusive. No legitimate officer of the law accompanied the crowd of men, who were more like an unruly mob than a posse.

For all that her skin was black, that she chewed and smoked a cob pipe or a long cigar, that she wore overalls, tended bar, handled half-broken stage horses, drank her whisky clear and could swear like a mule-skinner, Old Mary had the friendship of every cowman and common cowhand in the country. She would ride all day to nurse a sick person. She never turned away a hungry man. She counted no favor too great to do for a friend. Preacher and outlaw, cattleman and horse-thief found the same welcome under the sod roof of her log cabin.

"Them outlaws have been here," snarled the burly, rough-voiced man who seemed to be leader of the mob. "Which way did they ride? Talk up, old gal." And he colored his demand with insulting profanity.

"Yuh-all travel 'long, white man," she told him. "Axe me no questions an' yuh'll heah no lies. Go 'long 'bout yo' business an' lemme be."

"Glaum 'er, boys. Tie the black wench up by her thumbs and we'll see what a good quirtin' will do to'rds loosenin' up her lyin' tongue. Tie 'er up."

Old Mary fought like a black tigress, but she was badly outnumbered. But even when the rawhide quirt in the hands of the mob leader had ripped her back till her flannel shirt was soaked with blood, she told them nothing.

"Go ahead, whup me, yuh cowards. But fo' every welt yuh-all make on my hide, my friends will put ten welts on yo' back."

She was all but unconscious when they rode away, leaving her lying on the floor, moaning through clenched teeth. They had not neglected to help themselves to all the liquor they could carry away. The place was a wreck when they rode off, singing and shouting.

MARY was still lying there an hour later when Buck Rawlins rode up. With Buck was Tuley Bill Baker of the Rolling-M and Tuley Bill's side pardner, Cutbank Carter.

Buck's face was twisted with rage when he heard the pitiful tale Old Mary told them.

"I reckon, boys," he told Tuley Bill and Cutbank, "that it is just about time we went into action. Your five squatters from over on Sand Creek are in the mob. The big cuss that is roddin' the spread is the one I tangled with at the 7UP Springs. They're a hard lot and they take their orders from this Creighton Marley. Tuley, you and Cutbank get word to Bob Driscoll and the Murdocks and every other big spread within a day's ride of here. I'll get Mary patched up and then I'll ride on back home. Tell Bob Driscoll and the Murdocks and whoever else you can find that we're meeting at the 7UP ranch tomorrow night to have a medicine talk. Now drag it, you two old warthogs."

"How about a little horn uh likker before we start out on this long circle?"

"He'p yo'se'ves, boys," said Old Mary. Buck's ministrations and a stiff drink had revived her and she lit her cob pipe. "Buck, step up to the mahogany."

"If it's the same to you all," grinned Buck, "I'll drink water. I'm off the hard stuff."

They stared at him in wonderment. Tuley Bill whispered loudly in Cutbank's ear.

"Either the young hellion's in love er he's bin nibblin' the loco weed. I never thought we'd live to see Buck turn down a drink. Better keep an eye on him, pardner. He'll stand watchin'. That's what these higher educations do to the flowerin' youth uh the country.

"Mary, I'll take about three fingers uh yore best ridin' an' fightin' likker. We got bad hosses to ride and mean hombres to lick. Can't do it on plain water. Water is good fer alfalfa fields and to swim cattle acrost, but fer internal use it lacks lubricatin' qualities. Pore Buck. He'll be ailin' with rheumatism uh the gizzard if he keeps garglin' that water stuff. Here's yore health, Mary. Cutbank, here's red mud in yore ear."

"Here's salt in yore coffee, Tuley. Mary, here's regards."

And when they had set down their empty glasses and Tuley Bill was stuffing a pint into his chaps pocket, the two old rascals ignored the water-drinking Buck.

"Better git going," grinned Buck, "while you can still travel under your own power. Why the Rolling-M keeps two old soaks like you on the payroll has always been a great mystery. Roll along, cow waddies. Ride those ridges."

"If that thing gits violent, Mary," said Cutbank solemnly, jerking a thumb toward Buck, "rap it across the horns with a neckyoke. So-long."

When they had gone, Buck got a good description of the mob from Old Mary. She cleaned and loaded an old shotgun and stood the weapon against the backbar. Buck rode away a little later, headed for home.

BUCK had almost reached the 7UP ranch when he met Guy Jones. The boy's brown eyes were troubled and his slender face was grave.

"I had to see yuh, Buck," he said. "It's awful important. I need a friend to talk to. It's about Joe Phelps, Buck. I saw him git killed."

"Who killed him, Guy?"

"I don't know. I was too far off to recognize the man, but he rode a big gray horse that I'd swear was the same big gray that Angus Murdock always rides."

"And the man on the big gray killed Joe?"

"Near as Olga and I could tell, yes. We were picking berries up there above the rimrock on the Reservation side of the fence. I saw Joe ride along the trail. From where we were, we couldn't see the crossing. Just saw Joe ride that way. After a time we heard a shot, but we didn't pay much attention. I thought it was somebody hunting sage hens. But I don't like the sound of shooting and it sorta worried me.

"Then, in about twenty minutes, we saw the man on the gray horse ride at a lope toward the sheep camp on Big Warm. The man on the gray horse had come across the creek at the gravel crossin'. And that night, when Deacon Nelson got back to his place, he told us about finding Joe's body there."

A frown creased Buck's forehead.

"Deacon Nelson told me that his wife and two daughters were in Chinook that day. You say one of the girls was picking berries with you. How does that happen? Why did Nelson lie?"

"He didn't know he was lyin', Buck. He thought Olga had gone with her mother and sister. But instead, I'd met her along the road with a saddled horse and she and I rode into Lodge Pole. The sub-agent there has . . . has authority to marry folks. He married Olga and me. That is another reason I had to see yuh, Buck. Paw 'lowed if I married a nester, he'd kick me out. Mebby you could make him understand."

Buck gripped the younger boy's shoulder. "Shore thing, Guy. I'll fix it."

But he knew that he could not fix it.

THEY had not expected to find Hook Jones at the 7UP ranch. Hook, red-faced with anger because a 'breed who had just come from the sub-agency at Lodge Pole had told the one-armed rancher that Guy had married the nester girl on Big Warm.

Buck made no attempt just now to breach that black chasm of wrath that divided father and son. But he stood at Guy's elbow while the boy, white beneath the tan that coated his lean face, listened to the vitriolic abuse of the irate Hook. Dave Rawlins sat on the top log of the corral, whittling a stick. His sympathies were all with Hook. He could not ever

understand Guy as Buck understood the boy. Nor had Buck ever offered what seemed to Dave Rawlins like a reasonable excuse for his championship of the youngster whom the cow country had labeled "Hook's yellow-backed kid."

"So yuh snuck off an' got hitched to a nester gal, huh?" snarled Hook. "A Swede preacher's gal. Sod busters. Go get a plow an' foller it from now on. I'm shut of yuh. Git outa my sight and don't ever set a track on my place. You . . . you crawlin' li'l' . . ."

"Hold on, Hook," Buck cut in. "I reckon you've said a-plenty. Let him alone. Just because Guy don't pack a gun and get drunk and mix up in fights, you get the notion he ain't a man. Now, just because he married a fine decent girl, you cuss him out.

He paused for breath.

"You say he can't set foot on your place. Perhaps that suits him a lot, too. But this ain't your place, Hook. This is the 7UP ranch and Guy is just as welcome here as the flowers in May. You're saying a lot of stuff that some day you'll be almighty sorry you said. You think that if Guy wasn't gritty, he'd marry against your say-so?"

"A son of mine had better be dead and in his grave rather than be throwed into the nester outfit. He's no better than the lousiest scissor-bill farmer that's plowin' up this country. He's a traitor to his own kind."

"He's my friend, Hook. And he's as welcome here as you are. Let him alone."

Whatever Hook Jones was about to say to Buck was never said. Guy, tight-lipped, his face pale and tense, stepped up to his father.

"I'm tired of bein' called a yellow coward. I'm plumb willin' to stay away from you and yore place. If it's a disgrace to foller a plow, then I'm disgraceful. If it's cowardly to live an honest life, then I'm a coward. I don't need Buck to take my part. I'm standing here alone. I'm not afraid of you and yore guns. You tell me not to ever make a track on yore place. That goes double. You keep away from the place I'm locatin' on Big Warm. Stay away from me and mine. I hope I never have to speak to you again, or look at yuh. Good-bye."

BUCK'S way took him past the Driscoll ranch. It was getting dusk and Buck hoped that he might somehow persuade Bob Driscoll into a reconciliation. Also, the young cowboy hoped to meet Colleen and talk to her. He was about a mile from the ranch when he saw yellow flames licking at the dusky sky. There was a fairly strong wind that would carry the fire across the greasewood to the Driscoll place. Prairie fire, dread scourge of the Montana ranges, now threatened to wipe out Rolling M ranch.

Buck tickled his horse with the spurs. He reckoned that some cowboy had carelessly dropped a match or lighted a cigaret. Nor had he any other suspicion until, out of the uncertain light that precedes the night time, a shot ripped past his head.

Buck jerked his six-shooter, thumbing back the hammer. Now another shot droned past him. He shot at the flame of the other man's gun. Then, from another angle, more shots. Buck leaned along the neck of his racing horse. He saw a man on a big gray horse break from the shelter of a coulee. Buck followed, shooting at the retreating man.

Confusion now, as two other men on horseback raced into the twilight. There was the odor of kerosene. Buck found himself riding between the fires that had been set. Fires that licked hungrily at the kerosene-soaked brush and grass.

A sharp, burning pain stabbed at his shoulder. Then, as the rider on the big gray horse showed, cameo-clear against the light, Buck's horse stepped in a badger hole and somersaulted. The young rancher's head struck a rock and in that last split-second before oblivion, he heard a woman scream.

VIII

TULEY BILL BAKER and his boss, Colleen Driscoll, had done their best to persuade Bob Driscoll into going over to the 7UP ranch. But the blind owner of the Rolling M had taken a stand as solid as a granite cliff, and after an hour's futile argument, Colleen had winked at Tuley and motioned toward the barn.

"As long as dad feels that way about

it, Tuley," she said aloud as she kissed her blind father, "that settles it. Now let's get over to the lower pasture and see how the boys are coming along with those colts. See you later, Daddy."

When Tuley Bill and the girl were at the barn, Colleen laughed knowingly.

"I'll take Dad over there tomorrow, Tuley, in the buggy. He won't know where he's going until he gets there and then it will be too late for him to put up much of a yelp. I'll make Dave Rawlins shake hands with us and call this silly quarrel off. Now let's lope over toward Sand Creek and see if we can smell out any particular brand of orneriness those thugs might be hatching. I'll swing over by the lower gate at the pasture and you rim across the ridge. I'll meet you in half an hour or so, and we'll do some scoutinig around. Cutbank should be back from the Murdock place in an hour or so, and then we can make more medicine. If I get over to Sand Creek before you make it, I'll be waiting there where the trail drops off the ridge."

So it was that Colleen, choosing the longer but easier trail, was some minutes earlier than Tuley Bill who had to ride in at the head of a rough draw, then choose a trail that climbed the ridge and dropped over into Sand Creek.

Dusk found her riding alone along Sand Creek. More than anything she wanted to bring her father and Dave Rawlins back to that basis of comradeship that had once been a by-word in the cow country.

"As thick as Bob Driscoll and Dave Rawlins," they had said of the two. Now the two old-timers would ride many miles out of their way to avoid meeting.

Colleen, planning out a scheme whereby she might bring about a reconciliation, was deep in thought when she saw a man on a big gray horse ride against the darkening skyline, then turn into a coulee. For a brief moment the girl had a fair glimpse of horse and rider. The horse could be none other than Angus Murdock's big gray. The rider, big of frame, with black Stetson and black coat, must be the sheepman who was of that build and always, no matter how hot the day, wore that long tailed black coat and big black hat.

Startled, Colleen was about to hail him. What could Angus Murdock, who was not on friendly terms with the Rolling M outfit, be doing here on Driscoll's range? Then, just as she was about to quicken her horse's gait, a big blaze, over ahead in the draw where the man had ridden, made her give a startled gasp. She spurred her horse toward it.

Now, as if on signal, other fires broke out about a hundred yards apart. Now a rifle cracked. Other shots blazed through the dusk.

She saw a rider on a rangy black horse hemmed in by the fires. Buck Rawlins. Buck, emptying his six-shooter at the men who were shooting at him from both sides. Now Buck's horse hit a badger hole, upsetting, throwing the cowboy heavily. Fire was crackling around the fallen man as the black horse, up again, terrified by the fire and shooting, loped off. Colleen gave a startled scream as Buck was thrown.

NOW, reckless of her own peril, spurring her horse into that lane of snapping, crackling blaze, Colleen reached the fallen Buck. An instant and she was kneeling beside him.

"Buck! Buck, old boy! Come awake, Buck! Buck, you have to wake up!"

She fired at the retreating horse. The other fired back once, then vanished. Buck's head had been badly ripped by the fall. She tried to lift him. No use. Then she did the one and only thing she could do to save the man's life. Swiftly, with hands that shook with eager excitement, she unbuckled her rope strap. She dropped the loop over his shoulders and under his arms. Then she stepped back in the saddle. Taking her dallies around the saddle horn, she dragged the unconscious Buck to safety.

She was slipping the rope free when Tuley Bill's voice, hoarse with anxiety, hailed her. A moment and the old cowhand, for all the world like some snapping, snarling, grizzled old wolf, rode up out of the blaze-brightened dusk.

"Hurt, Colleen?" was his first question.

"Not a bit. Buck got his, though. Can't tell how bad. There's a bullet hole in his shoulder and his head's all blood. I'll patch him up as best I can. You get busy at the fire. Be with you pronto. If any of that dirty outfit skylight themselves, let

your conscience be your guide. Hurry, Tuley."

"I spotted two of 'em, dang 'em. The two Listons. And none other than old Angus Murdock with 'em. Sheep-stinkin' sons!" Tuley Bill rode away, his slicker in his hand.

Now Buck groaned a little and moved. He woke up bewildered, grinned thinly when he recognized Colleen, and tried to sit up.

"Take it easy, pardner," she told him. "Gosh, I thought you were dead, old man. Easy, now."

"There's a fire, kid; and we're the fire department. Slickers and saddle blankets and if the snakes haven't set too much of it, we stand a chance. Quit tryin' to hold me, pard."

"You're groggy," she protested, but he shook her off almost roughly.

"Let's go, sis!" he called, and headed for his horse that now was more quiet.

He jerked the slicker off his saddle. Colleen followed suit. Now they fought, the girl and the two men, with desperate energy. The girl never got far from Buck. She knew that he must be sick and dizzy, that at any moment he might drop in his tracks. The hot blaze snapped at them with yellow tongues. The heat was like a furnace blast. Slickers whipped the blaze into smoldering embers.

Then another patch of brush, soaked with kerosene, would burst into angry flame. So they fought their unequal battle against the fire. A fire that kept gaining headway, like a sullen, fighting, red-tongued beast, roaring and crackling and hissing its mighty challenge like a thing alive.

Slickers were whipped to shreds. Now they were using saddle blankets. Buck staggered like a drunken man, blood-smeared, one-armed. But he would not heed the commands of the other two to rest.

"I'm all right," he gritted.

Now another rider came up on the run. It was Cutbank Carter.

"Yuh never was anything but late in yore whole miserable life," panted Tuley Bill. "Git off that hoss and git busy."

"Who set 'er? Who set 'er?"

"We did, yuh ol' jughead. We set 'er to warm our gizzards. If yuh got a snort, give Buck a good 'un. The young 'un's about all-in."

The fire was not gaining so much now. Other riders from the Rolling M, together with some farmers, were coming to swell the number of firefighters. Wagons with filled water barrels came up. Wet sacks beat back the blaze. Nester and cowpuncher fought shoulder to shoulder against their common enemy, the prairie fire.

Riders would soon be coming from as far away as the 7UP, thus following the unwritten code of cowland that says a man shall fight fire when that fire is within a half day's ride.

Tuley Bill and Colleen had forced Buck to sit down over near one of the wagons. There were plenty of men now to fight fire. An hour and the blaze would be a wide path of black land spotted with smoldering twigs and spots of cow chips.

Now some riders, followed by a spring wagon laden with soaked sacks, came up. At sight of the two foremost riders, Buck shook off Colleen's restraining hand. His hand on his gun he faced the man on the big gray horse and the younger man who rode with him.

"A man," said Buck Rawlins harshly, "that will set fire to the range of his neighbor is a low-down snake that needs killin'. Murdock, you and your son sure have gall to come here pretending you want to help put out a fire that you set. I'm too crippled to fight with my hands, but if you'll step down, I'll shoot it out with yuh both here and now. Git down and fill your hands!"

IX

ANGUS MURDOCK, huge of frame, his red face with its side-cut whiskers as stern as the land that had given his ancestors birth, stepped down from his horse. There was no hint of hate in his movement, no trace of anger in his face that was seamed and weatherbeaten and sternly lined. Towering above the blood-spattered, bandaged, tight-lipped Buck, he stood there his Scot's eyes studying the young cowman.

"Ye're hurt laddie, and I ken that ye're sick. I have no quarrel wi' ye, Buck Rawlins, and 'tis well ye ken it, er should.

I heard the words ye spoke but a'ready they're forgotten. I've no quarrel here." He beckoned his son to dismount.

"I saw Angus Murdock on that same gray horse," said Buck hotly, "if you want an answer. I saw him set fire to the range. I've got one of his bullets in my hide right now. And a 7UP cowboy lies in his grave with another of Angus Murdock's bullets in his back. And you say that the Murdocks don't pack guns!"

Bill Murdock had dismounted. He looked at his father in a puzzled way. Then Bill faced Buck. All the old enmity between the two had again boiled up.

"You lie, Rawlins."

"Then call me a liar also," said Colleen Driscoll, her face white and tense, "and include Tuley Bill. We all three saw that gray horse and the man on the gray horse. If Angus Murdock can prove an alibi that we'll believe, then he's as canny a Scot as ever crossed the ocean to put sheep into the cow country. You Murdocks had better get back on your horses. Ride off this range before you get hurt. Stay off the Rolling M range. Git!"

For a moment the stern face of the veteran sheepman was heavy with wrath. His eyes blazed from under scowling brows while his big hands clenched and unclenched. His son laid a hand on the older man's great arm.

"Don't give 'em the satisfaction of an answer to their dirty accusations, Father. Our fence gets cut, our sheep killed, our property destroyed and now they say we set fire to their range. It's all just a frame-up between the Rolling M and 7UP outfits to run us out of the sheep business. We're not wanted here. If we start anything we'll be murdered, that's plain.

"When Buck Rawlins sobers up and washes his face, when he can stand up and fight, I'll give him a good belly full of scrappin' and make him howl like a coyote. We come here to help and we're treated like criminals. They just don't know any better, perhaps. But I'll tell this for their benefit now: That in five years there'll be plenty sheep on the 7UP and Rolling M ranges. We'll sheep-off your range and we'll hire nesters to herd the sheep. The day has gone by when men like Dave Rawlins can run Montana at the end of a six-shooter. We'll make these cow outfits move on to some other country where they can steal and murder honest men."

THE Murdocks rode back the way they had come, leaving Colleen and Buck and Tuley Bill standing there a little dazed.

"What's wrong pardner?"

"I just can't make myself believe that Angus Murdock set fire to our range. Somehow, in spite of what my eyes saw, I can't convince myself that a man like Angus Murdock would be that ornery. Well, the well-known milk is spilled now, Buck. The Murdocks will throw in with the nesters, and I'll bet a hat that Bill was making no idle threat when he said he'd sheep us out. Oh, gosh, Buck, I'm going to weep like a woman. And there isn't a clean handkerchief within miles."

More than anything Buck wanted to put his good arm around Colleen and tell her that he loved her. That there had never been a day in his life, from the day they met as kids, that he hadn't loved her. But he knew better than to say it. Because he knew now, in his innermost heart, that Colleen did not love him that same way. That the man she loved was the young sheepman who had just ridden away after his declaration of war against the Rolling M and 7UP outfits. Colleen Driscoll loved big Bill Murdock.

Buck grinned twistedly and patted her shoulder. "It's the first hundred years that are the hardest little pardner."

Colleen rubbed the tears from her eyes and tried to smile. She had always known that Buck loved her. And she knew now that he understood the cause of her tears.

"Good old Buck. Good pardner. Golly, who's that coming? The charge of the light brigade?"

"I'd say, for a guess," said Buck, squinting through the smoke and the flickering light of the dying prairie fire, "that it is Ike Niland and his posse.

"After The Nighthawk?"

Buck smiled grimly. "After a man that killed a certain conductor in a gambling joint in Chinook night before last. The same conductor that shot Tex Arnold in the back."

So had the two outlaws missing at the meeting at Old Mary's when the loot was

divided, accounted for their absence. So had the murder of their pardner Tex Arnold been paid off in full.

IKE NILAND'S bronzed face was grave and he tugged uneasily at his drooping mustache. He looked from Buck to Colleen and from the girl to the cowpunchers who had quit fighting fire and gathered there in the lantern light at the wagon. Among the crowd was a small sprinkling of nesters.

"Buck," said the grizzled sheriff finally, "where'd yuh git that tied-up shoulder?"

"From one of the skunks that set this fire," said Buck. "What else might be on your mind?"

"A-plenty. These men with me are railroad detectives and U. S. law officers. There's bin talk about you bein' mixed up with The Nighthawk and his gang. It's known that the two men mixed up with the killin' of a railroad conductor the other night, rode away from Old Mary's road ranch on 7UP horses. These gents want to ask yuh some questions."

"Before I give any answers, tell me this, Ike. Am I under arrest?"

"Sorry, Buck, but it looks thataway. We was on our way to the 7UP ranch when we sighted the blaze and rode tuh see what we could do."

"Sheriff," spoke up one of the possemen, "if this is Buck Rawlins, then we'd better take care of the main business. This little fire can be investigated later. Rawlins where are. The Nighthawk and his men hiding?"

"Wherever they are, you'll never break any speed records getting there. I understand I'm under arrest. All right. I'll do my talking through an attorney. Nice weather we're having."

"I'd advise you to take a civil attitude," snapped the detective.

"I didn't ask for your advice, mister. I wouldn't have it as a gift. Ike, I'm your prisoner. I'm asking your protecton against any third-degree stuff. When do we start for the hoosegow?"

"Directly, son, directly. How bad are yuh hurt?"

"He's hurt too badly to make any seventy-mile ride, Sheriff," said Colleen sharply. "There's a bad hole in his shoulder, and he has a nasty scalp wound. He needs a doctor more than he needs a warrant served on him. For humanity's sake, for the sake of common decency, I demand of you that you let me take him to our ranch. I've already sent for a doctor. Ike Niland, will you permit these men to take Buck prisoner and make him ride horseback clear to Chinook?"

"Son," said the old sheriff, a curious twinkle in his eye. "I've dangled yuh on my knee when yuh was a yearlin' and seen yuh cut yore fust teeth. Since you was old enough tuh pick up cuss words from sech ornery old boneheads as Tuley Bill Baker and Cutbank Carter, you've had the habit of blowin' up like a charge uh black powder. I pay as much mind to them hotheaded busts as I do to that ol' fool roan hoss uh mine when he tries tuh snort at some booger he sees.

"I'll just turn yuh over to this spittin', crawlin', fightin' young lady who used tuh dangle on my knee, likewise. Yo're a pair tuh put white hairs in any man's head. Take keer uh the young rascal, honey. He's under arrest and I expect him tuh stay at the ranch, same as he'd stay in jail. No traipsin' off, mind."

Colleen nodded, her eyes starry. Buck grinned and held out his hand.

"There's my word for it, Ike. I'll stay there if Bob Driscoll will let me."

Ike stepped back in the saddle, ignoring the scowls of the railroad detectives.

"See yuh later regardin' the fire and the shootin' scrape. Me and these gentlemen has pressin' business elsewhere. So-long."

An hour later Tuley Bill and Cutbank carried the unconscious Buck Rawlins up the steps of the Driscoll ranch house. Ahead of them strode Colleen. Her father's voice hailed her from his chair on the big veranda where he spent his days and long evenings in his world of eternal darkness.

"Who's with you, honey?" he called, his ears picking up the sounds made by the two old cowboys with their burden. "Who's there?"

"Buck Rawlins, dad. He's shot, perhaps dying, so I brought him home. You don't mind?"

"Mind?" The voice of old man Bob Driscoll trembled with emotion. "This is Buck's home as well as ours, ain't it?

Take him to his old room. Tell him . . . welcome home . . . and send fer Dave. Send fer Dave Rawlins. I reckon the stubborn ol' son will have tuh cave in and come. Git his room tidied up."

X

"WELL, boneheads," snapped Onion Oliver, as Tuley Bill and Cutbank rode up to the cabin that Onion was building for his female nester, as he called her, "what business yuh got 'round here on Miss West's ranch? Who sent yuh and why for?"

With elaborate unconcern the two visitors ignored Onion's deadly glare and his hissed warning. They sat their saddles with a rakish, if somewhat overstrained attitude of nonchalance. When Mazie smiled, they each stepped down to the ground and in the left hand of each was a small package of mail.

"We come past the mail box, ma'am," said Tuley Bill. "An' seein' that there was some letters for yuh, we reckoned we might fetch 'em over."

"Now wasn't that sweet of these two cowboys?" she appealed to Onion, who was caressing the butt of his six-shooter with meaning gesture.

"Don't quarrel, boys," said Mazie West. "I'm sure I'd hate to see three brave guys like you shootin' holes in each other. And gee, it is lonesome enough here without scarin' away anybody. We'll all have some lunch and pass around the gossip. Ain't it at the Rolling M ranch that they took Buck Rawlins when he got hurt last week?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Tuley Bill, turning his back on Onion, "and he is doin' right well. And it's a treat to see Dave and Bob Driscoll sittin' together on the porch, swappin' yarns and sippin' toddies and tradin' hosses. We just fetched the White Cloud stud over and we're takin' the Rawlins Stardust stallion back with us.

"Buck sent word that whatever yuh needed in the way uh grub er anything, ma'am, to just tell pore ol' Onion tuh git it from the ranch. I heered him tell Dave that he reckoned you wasn't any too well fixed fer cash and there was no use in yuh bein' robbed by them stores in town. And he sent word that if Creighton Marley showed up to have ol' Onion shoot the heels off his boots."

While Cutbank began the recital of a bloody battle with a Cheyenne war party, Onion followed Tuley Bill to the creek.

WHEN the bottle had been passed, Tuley Bill lowered his voice to a whisper. "Seen Ike Niland since him and the posse went past on the way to the badlands?"

"They came back last night and Ike 'lowed they'd had bad luck."

"Then Hook must of reached the cabin on Rock Crick in time to warn the Nighthawk and his men there."

"Shore thing. Hook's back in Landusky. His missus is sick, ain't expected tuh live. Guy has bin stayin' with her. The pore thing has gone plumb outa her mind. Thinks she's back in Wyoming. And, goshamighty but things looks bad between Hook and Guy. They ain't speakin' and Hook has an idee that Guy was on Big Warm when Joe Phelps got shot. He's talked it plumb open about Guy and hints that Guy's too yaller tuh tell what he knows.

"Hook claims a scissor-bill called Eric Swanson done the killin' and because Swanson has married a sister to the nester gal that Guy taken fer bad er worse, Guy won't tell what he seen. It's mighty bad talk fer any man to make about any other gent, but it's downright dangerous when a man like Hook Jones makes it ag'in' his own son. Guy is sayin' nothin' but he taken to packin' a gun. It looks bad, Tuley Bill."

"When yuh see Hook, tell him tuh come to the ranch. Dave and Bob Driscoll want tuh talk with him. And don't tell him that Guy thinks Angus Murdock either killed Joe Phelps, er else he knows who did do the killin'. Guy told Buck that much. And here's somethin' else that Hook ain't to be told. Guy is workin' fer the Murdocks as camp tender. This Eric Swanson is likewise tendin' camp fer the Murdocks. Me, I think the same as does Hook about Guy Jones, but Buck says different.

"Murdock is movin' three bands uh wethers onto the forest reserve next to the Rawlins range. He's startin' a range war and he's throwed in with the nesters.

Onion, she's gonna be war. Bob Driscoll and Dave Rawlins are a-skeered Hook might start shootin'."

"He will," said Onion, "if his missus dies, which same she's expected to do almost any day. I'll git word tuh Hook to go to the Rolling M. Anything else?"

"Keep this Marley away from this yaller-haired nester gal. He's set to buy her relinquishment and put one uh his toughs on this place. He thinks she's too friendly with the 7UP. Somebody tipped off one uh our boys in town. These 7UP springs is worth more money than me and you both ever seen. Marley will try tuh buy her off. If he can't, he'll try to scare her off. There's a letter in my pocket to her from Marley. I wanted to see you before I give it to her. Think she'll sell out to that slick dude?"

"Not a million," said Onion stoutly. "That gal's a champion."

Tuley Bill hastily recovered the bottle and together they went back to the tent where Cutbank was reciting, with significant gestures, how he had scalped fifteen Cheyennes.

AFTER some minutes of stalling around, Tuley Bill "accidentally" discovered the letter from Marley to Mazie West. She opened and read it in their presence. When she finished reading, she smiled at the three old cowpunchers.

"Boys," she said, giving them all a melting smile that each took to be meant only for him, "it looks like I have a chance to clean up some real wampum. Two thousand smackers, to be exact. That might be chicken feed to you high-rolling guys of the great open spaces, but to a stranded chorine that's made a big mistake in ever leaving the great white way, it's important money. It'll take me back on Broadway and keep me in silk stockings and groceries till I land a job. It'll bring back a lot of dreams that were slipping away. It'll take me back among the friends I left behind me. It'll take me home."

Mazie West's cheeks were a little flushed, her eyes bright with dreams, her voice vibrant with emotion. The three old cowpunchers eyed one another uneasily and tried to look like they were sharing her joy.

"Marley, the johnny that located me here, offers that much for my relinquishment," she went on. "He wants me to keep it a secret, but what good is a secret if you can't share it with your pals? This Creighton Marley is a great guy. A regular sagebrush Napoleon, see. He knows what he wants and how to go after it.

"He wants this little homestead of mine and he's waited till he knew darned well that I was getting homesick for elevators and subways and good shows and drugstore salads and pals that spoke my language. Then he sends me this blank form to fill out and make myself bye-bye money. He knows I'm broke and lonesome and life out here is just like doing time in Sing Sing. Yeh, he's a wise boy, this Marley sketch. Onion, stake me to a match. That's a good boy. And now, boys, watch this little gesture." Mazie touched the match flame to the letter and the blank form.

"Mazie West's two thousand dollar bonfire, no less." Her lips smiled bravely, but her eyes were suspiciously moist. The three old cow waddies looked at her with solemn awe. Onion gave Tuley Bill a look that spoke volumes.

They all three sensed the sacrifice this homesick girl of the footlights was making even if they did not know why she was refusing money that meant so much to her.

A SOFT, steady rain came from a sky that was the gray color of lead. Clods of sticky mud soiled the boots of the men who stood there, hatless, heads bowed beside an open grave.

The coffin made of pine boards had been covered with layers of black cheesecloth. This was the work of the women of Landusky, their last offering of kind-hearted sympathy to the poor, half-demented woman who had been the wife of Hook Jones. They had never quite understood her, had these women of Landusky. They had not quite understood the terrible suffering of the white-haired wife of the one-armed Hook Jones who had been a killer in the Wyoming cattle war.

The women stayed under the shelter of their buggy tops. The hearse was a spring wagon hired from the barn in town, driven by a restless team of half-broken horses. The driver, slicker clad, took an occasional nip from a hidden bottle. The various

husbands of the women who had come to the funeral sat in discomfort beside their women. Horses stirred restlessly and there were muttered, undertoned words of profanity from the men. Here and there a woman's sniffling. There was the slosh of boots in the trampled mud.

The voice of Guy Jones. He was dressed in cheap black, his hair wet, the rain spotting the open pages of the worn Bible that had been the most prized possession of his mother. For Guy Jones was saying the last words of prayer before the sodden clods were dropped in on the coffin.

He did not seem aware of the rain, of the people about him. He was delivering the final prayer above the open grave of his mother, reading from the frayed Bible from which she had taught him the words of God. He did not seem to see Hook Jones, his father. Hook, in overalls and slicker, hatbrim pulled across eyes that no man had ever read. Then Hook had removed his hat when the saloon man next to him had whispered something.

Hook's face, hard-lined, masklike. Bloodshot eyes that might or might not be shot with grief, dripping with rain. His eyes staring blindly at the open grave and the black covered coffin within it. The coffin that would soon be covered with wet dirt. The coffin that held the remains of the only woman Hook Jones had ever loved. Mother of the son he now hated with a terrible, heart-chilling hatred. Under the dripping, yellow slicker that Hook wore was a six-shooter in an open holster that was tied by a buckskin thong, low on his thigh. The pocket on the right hand side of Hook's slicker was cut open so that he could easily get to that gun.

Now the Bible in Guy's hands closed gently. He knelt, bareheaded, there in the mud at the head of the grave. His right hand found a small piece of sodden clay and he let it slide into the open grave.

Then he got to his feet, the knees of his cheap black pants forever ruined. And without a glance at his father, he turned and walked to the top buggy that he had hired. The driver looked at him with an awed expression. Guy carefully stowed the Bible in a canvas sheath and shoved it inside his sodden black coat.

"Town, Guy?" asked the driver in a scared voice.

"Town," nodded Guy.

Now the other rigs, as if at a signal, started for Landusky. Until they had all gone, save the buckboard that had fetched the saloon man and Hook Jones. It stood there, the team of buckskins tied to the graveyard fence.

In the hands of Hook Jones, or rather in the one hand and the hook that served him as a hand, was gripped a shovel that he had unceremoniously taken from the man whose duty it was to fill the graves. Hook held the shovel as he might have held a rifle. Then, without a word, he began filling the grave of the woman who had been his wife.

After what seemed a long time the grave was filled. Hook Jones tossed aside the shovel and strode through the mud to the waiting buckboard. He and the saloon man untied the halter ropes and climbed into the rig. Hook handled the lines with astonishing skill as the rain-chilled buckskin team went against their collars with a swift lunge. When they neared town, Hook gave the lines to the saloon man. From under a heavy tarp he took a sawed-off shotgun.

The saloon man gave him a startled look. What's the scatter-gun for, Hook?"

"I'm killin' the snivelin' little whelp that laid his mother in her grave." Hook's voice was rasping, scarcely human. The voice of a killer whose heart is drained of mercy. The saloon man was chilled by the terrible coldness of Hook's voice and the slitted glare of the man's bloodshot eyes that burned from a face twisted out of shape with hate.

But there was no sign of Guy Jones. Nor were there any of the Big Warm nesters in any of the saloons. The men who watched him make his sinister search felt the deadly glitter of his bloodshot eyes and gave mute thanks when he had gone on.

Men who had known the one-armed rancher since he had first come to the country, men who had joshed with him and swapped yarns had not dared speak. Hook was like some very dangerous beast, prowling, bent on killing.

This was Hook Jones, killer from the bloody Wyoming war. That brutal, blood-

smeared range war that had outlawed Hook, had robbed his wife of her sanity, and had given him his son Guy who today had read a passage from the Bible and whose black garments showed no bulge of a hidden gun. This was Hook Jones, deadly killer, on the prowl. Where other men might boast of their toughness, Hook's was a lipless, red-eyed silence more terrible than any boasting.

Now, when he could not find the son whose life he had sworn to take, he saddled his horse and rode out of town, still with the sawed-off shotgun across his arm. His head was bent and the ugly steel hook that served as his left hand, hooked itself around the saddle horn. So Hook Jones quit Landusky that day. And those who watched him go knew that he had gone to join The Nighthawk. Hook Jones was no longer wholly sane.

"UNCLE" HANK MAYBERRY looked from his swivel chair to the gilt-lettered label on the door that he had left open when he came into his office, there at the Valley Bank.

"Henry Clay Mayberry, President."

So he read aloud in an undertone. He studied the lettering with a mingling of disgust and amusement and anger. Then he swore softly at the lettering as if it were able to hear and understand his words.

A small, white-haired, white-bearded man, Uncle Hank Mayberry. He walked with a limp that was the result of a flint-headed Sioux arrow. Time had been when Hank Mayberry had been a government scout and a good one.

The feet that he deliberately and defiantly put on the polished mahogany desk were encased in high-heeled, shop-made boots. The hat that he had dropped over a bronze desk ornament was a high-crowned Stetson of finest beaver. He snorted at the onyx ash tray and scattered his cigaret ashes on the expensive rug. The ashes landed where, until recently, a large brass cuspidor had always stood near his chair. Then he unbuttoned his vest and chuckled.

"What'd ol' Jim Bridger or Liver Eatin' Johnson say if they could ketch me in this danged layout?"

He waited half an hour for his son-in-law. Then he limped out into the front part of the Valley Bank and beckoned the immaculate teller.

"Ring up that sign painter and tell him to fetch along his outfit. When he gits here, tell him that if he don't want tuh git into trouble, he better wipe out that Henry Clay and put in Hank in its place. My name is Hank Mayberry. That's what goes on that door. When Howard Snodgrass gits around tell him he'll find me over at the Bucket uh Blood settin' in a game uh draw poker."

It was here that Dave Rawlins and Bob Driscoll, the latter with his arm linked in that of his old friend, found Hank Mayberry. Hank looked up from three aces and a pair of treys. He blinked hard for a moment at sight of the two men whose friendship had been severed these past years. Then, with a joyous, if somewhat profane whoop, he got to his feet and greeted his old friends with a manner that certainly could never become the president of a bank.

Others dropped their cards to join the reunion. The white-aproned bartender who stood grinning in the doorway of the card room was told to bring in some real champagne.

So it was that Howard Snodgrass, an hour later, looked in upon a gathering that was a decided shock to his dignity.

"But, look here," said Howard Snodgrass impatiently, "we have an appointment with Marley and the two gentlemen he's bringing over to the bank."

"Tell 'em to wait," chuckled Uncle Hank.

"How long will you be here?"

With an angry scowl, Howard Snodgrass took an abrupt departure. Before he was out of earshot, he heard the laughter behind the closed door of the card room.

"Bob," said Uncle Hank Mayberry, when the laughter had died out, "if ever Colleen fetches home one uh them dudes, set the dawgs on him. Now lemme tell yuh about that sign on the door again. Dave, hang yore head out the door and tell Pete tuh rattle his hocks with that wine. Bin a shore long time since us boys got together. We're about to go the way uh the buffalo, but before we go, we'll holler once more."

AT the bank, Creighton Marley and his two business associates waited impatiently for the coming of Uncle Hank Mayberry. Marley was in a black mood but dared not show it. The two men who had hoped to leave Chinook on the afternoon train were visibly annoyed.

"It looks like we'll have to wait until tomorrow," Snodgrass informed them. "The old . . . ah . . . Mr. Mayberry is busy. He won't be disturbed."

"We came down from Helena, Snodgrass, to get this deal put through today. We're losing valuable time. We're in a position to do this bank a great deal of good. If you can't handle our money, we'll go elsewhere."

Howard Snodgrass did his best to smooth out the ruffled tempers of the two men who, at Marley's request, had come from Helena to do business with the bank. Snodgrass and Marley, for many weeks, had been working toward the consummation of this big deal with certain men who were Creighton Marley's backers. Now, on this day of days, when the deal was to go through, Hank Mayberry walked out, foregathered with old cronies who could do the bank no good, and was drinking champagne and yarning with those broken-down soon-to-be-penniless stockmen.

It was a bitter dose for Howard Snodgrass. The proverbial final straw was placed when the painter came to change the lettering on the door of Hank's office. Howard Snodgrass had the unfortunate man ushered out with more than necessary firmness.

At three o'clock that afternoon Howard Snodgrass took Marley and the two Helena men to his home for cocktails and dinner.

At somewhat after three thirty that same afternoon, Uncle Hank Mayberry and Dave Rawlins, with the blind Bob Driscoll between them, walked down the street from the Bucket of Blood Saloon to the Valley Bank. Oddly enough, none of the three showed any visible signs of being intoxicated.

Behind Uncle Hank's smile lay a bitter rancor, born of many months' brooding. Howard Snodgrass had, for a long time, run the bank with a snobbish, suave, kid-gloved but firm and effective manner. He had taken the actual management of the bank from hands more accustomed to rope and branding iron and gun than they were to fountain pen and legal papers.

Snodgrass had managed to get in a board of directors that smothered Uncle Hank's ideas. Their legal phrases puzzled him, their manner rather awed him. He did not understand banking laws and he reckoned that they must be legally right in their opinions. Though he pointed out that he had always managed to amble along somehow before Snodgrass married his daughter and married himself into the bank.

True, he had been mighty careless about his friends paying off their notes on time and had often made loans to men that could put up little but their names on paper as security. But those men were men with whom Hank had crossed the plains. They were men whose given word was as good as the United States President's bond. They had never beat him out of a dollar. When they couldn't pay off a note, Hank would have 'em make out a new one.

"Set down, boys. Here's a easy chair fer Bob. And now, before we go any fu'ther, let's git somethin off our minds. Both you boys want yore notes renewed, don't yuh? And some money fer runnin' expenses till after the fall shipments and after Bob peddles some uh them hosses. All right. Name yore own figgers, yuh two ol' sons."

So, on that day, did Uncle Hank Mayberry, out of loyalty to his old friends, do that which was soon to cause so much trouble. Those bits of signed paper, symbols of the sort of friendship that belonged to buffalo days, were to stand as evidence against a white-haired old man that he had violated banking laws and was therefore liable to a long term behind the bars of State's Prison.

It was the next day that Uncle Hank Mayberry listened to the proposition that Creighton Marley, Marley's two backers in the land business, and Howard Snodgrass put before him.

Patiently, in a silence that made his son-in-law uneasy, did Uncle Hank listen. And when they were done talking, the old plainsman got to his feet and limped to the door of his office. The door with the painted glass panel. He opened the door and held it open. His blue eyes blazed with

anger. When he spoke, his voice was brittle;

"This way out!"

They went. With them went a substantial account. With them also went Howard Snodgrass. And on the evening of that same day Snodgrass wired a message to the State bank examiner at Helena.

XI

BUCK RAWLINS looked up from the letter that had come by messenger from town. He grinned at Colleen, who sat with him on the big veranda of the Driscoll ranch house.

Buck pointed to a man who had dismounted to open the big pole gate that was the main entrance to the Driscoll ranch. The man was Deacon Nelson, the nester father-in-law of Guy Jones.

Nelson led his mule through the gate, mounted, and rode up to the house. Buck rose to greet the giant Swede, whose rugged face was clouded with trouble.

"What's the matter?" Buck came abruptly to the point.

"I've come to ask, in the name of God, for the sake of humanity and common decency, that you call off your night riders. They have run off our work horses and mules, cut our fences, driven cattle across our grain fields. My wife and daughter live in constant terror. Last night Eric Swanson, my son-in-law, was waylaid and badly beaten.

"The dry-land farmers are incensed. They are banding together in order to fight back. Can you not see, young man, what this is coming to? There will be bloodshed, murder. We came here to this country a peaceful people. I am an ordained minister and the pastor of these harassed people who come to me for advice. I have done all in my power to calm them, but the hour has now come when my words will no longer hold them.

"They are holding secret meetings to which I am not asked. They will fight back, once they start. And because we are men of peace, do not think that we cannot fight if the cause is a just one. For God's sake, man, call off your hoodlums!"

"Have a seat, Deacon," said Buck, "and listen to what I have to say. As the God we both believe in is my judge, we have no band of night riders. The 7UP cowboys are at the other end of the range, ready to begin the calf round-up. The Rolling M riders are almost a hundred miles away gathering horses. You will have to believe me when I say that we are not the breed that uses such method of attack.

"We have men scattered around to watch but we'd have to hire an army to guard the amount of range we have. And on the Rolling M range, horses are stolen and chased with dogs until mares heavy with colt have died. Little colts have been so badly crippled that they had to be killed.

"I might ask you, even as you have asked me, that you call off your night riders. But we've come to the conclusion that, while some of the men who are doing this dirty work are nesters, they don't belong to your clan. They are of a tough breed, put in here by Creighton Marley to make trouble between the cattlemen and the farmers. We have no actual proof, yet, but we're working on it mighty strong.

"I agree with you, things are getting tight. Trouble may come at any time. And nobody but Creighton Marley, sitting safe in his office at Chinook, will benefit by it. Tell your people that. Ask Guy Jones what he thinks, of the Rawlins outfit or the Rolling M outfit. He will tell you that we are not murderers or thieves."

"I HAVE already asked Guy and the boy verifies your claim. But the father of that poor, grief-stricken boy is a cold-blooded killer who claims allegiance to the 7UP outfit. Can you deny that?"

"I can and I will deny it, sir. Until Hook Jones quarreled with Guy, he was on the 7UP payroll and handled our cattle. His ranch was a line-camp headquarters in the winter time. But when he turned bitter, my father sent for him to come to this ranch. He was to be given the choice of obeying orders or quitting. Hook did not come here. He sent word back that he was not coming in to the ranch. Where he is or what he is doing, I don't know. I wish I did. Miss Driscoll and I were discussing the man when we sighted you coming."

A smile softened the rugged features of the farmer preacher. "I'm finding myself on the verge of being convinced,"

he said in his deep, kindly voice. "If only you could so convince my people. If you could only aid me in stopping these night riders by some method that would not necessitate the taking of human lives."

"I'll do my best, Deacon," said Buck impulsively. "Tell you what I'll do. Find out where the nesters are holding their meeting tonight and I'll go there with you. I'm no orator, but if they'll listen, I'll say what I know to be the truth. How's that for a proposition?"

"If you can convince Eric Swanson and the others, then you are doing a merciful and manly deed."

THE nesters had, by popular vote, elected Eric Swanson as their leader. A blond Viking of a man, with eyes the same blue as the sea is blue when the summer sun warms its water. Blue that can change to a cold greenish tint when a storm is brewing. A giant of a man, this Eric Swanson who had taken up a homestead on Big Warm, and possessed of a stubborn brand of courage.

Buck Rawlins, ushered by Deacon Nelson into the little schoolhouse where the farmers had gathered, was met by cold, unfriendly stares. The deacon had passed Buck through the several guards who surrounded the schoolhouse. Now the young cowman stood there in the aisle between the desks and benches filled with brawny farmers, facing Eric Swanson, who stood on the platform. Eric, whose face bore the bruises and discolorations of his last night's attack.

Buck's quick eyes swept the assemblage of unfriendly men. Mostly, he reckoned, they were Swedes and Norwegians, with a sprinkling of German and Swiss. They were the farmer type who are grain raisers. Big-boned men, dull of wit, stubborn-minded, slow to make decisions and when those decisions are made, still more slow to give way.

Buck saw the difficulty of his well-meant mission. He saw the antagonism of the farmer toward the cowman. A word from Eric Swanson and their hands, hard and big and calloused, would be on him. And just now, as the man stood there on the platform, his bruised face hardening, Buck thought perhaps that signal might be given.

"WHO sent you here?" growled Eric Swanson.

"I brought him here," spoke the deep voice of Deacon Nelson, who stood behind Buck.

"You take him away before he gets hurt. Nobody here sent for that man. We don't want him."

"He has something to say, Eric," said the deacon. "Something you all should hear."

"He has nothing to say that we want to listen to. He comes here to spy on us. Get out of here, Rawlins."

Buck saw the faces of the nesters become more tense. He heard the whispered mutter that ran like a wave across the thirty or forty men packed in the room. He sensed in Eric Swanson an enemy who would fight without giving way.

He knew as he stood there that there was nothing he could say, nothing he could do, to make these sod-busters understand. They would never believe him. They would brand him as a liar and a spy. Their looks already condemned him. These men would not listen, as their deacon had listened there on the veranda of the Rolling M ranch. They would only laugh at him, sneer at him, goad him into some rash act that would only precipitate the war that was all but declared between the cattlemen and the nesters. Buck Rawlins had seen their side. But they would stubbornly, stupidly refuse to see his.

Buck, a little white about the lips, fighting back the words that he wanted to say, words that would tell them what fools they were, turned to Deacon Nelson.

"I reckon, sir," he said in a low tone, "that I'll be going. I'm not wanted here. I can't talk their language. There is nothing I can say to that man on the platform or to his friends, that will help matters. I'd better go."

"Yah," leered a big farmer on the aisle who had overheard Buck's words, "ya better go or you be sorry."

BUCK'S hand dropped to his gun. His temper, white hot in a split-second, swept over him like a flame. His eyes bored into the now startled eyes of the loutish farmer.

"I'm goin', you plow shover, but I'm

not goin' because I'm scared. Don't open that loose mouth of yours again. Don't any of you crowd me into a scrap. I'm alone against the pack of yuh but I'll make some of you sorry. I came here to make peace. You don't want me. All right. But the first man of you, and the next five that follow him, that tries to lay a hand on me, will be sorry."

Buck backed toward the doorway, his hand on his gun, his steely eyes holding them at bay. Deacon Nelson stood there like a man doomed, as the young cattleman backed out. But as a restless movement passed over the crowd, the deacon's big frame blocked the doorway. His arms upraised, he spoke to them in his deep, throaty voice.

"Stand back. You don't know what you are doing, men. Let that man go his way in peace."

Buck, smarting with helpless rage, stepped up on his horse. His hand on his gun, he rode past the guards. As he rode into the shadows of the night a voice, cautious, desperate, hailed him out of the darkness.

"Buck! Buck!"

"Who is it?" Buck called softly.

"It's me. Guy. Guy Jones. I've bin waitin', Buck, since I watched yuh ride to the schoolhouse with the deacon. I've got tuh talk to yuh, Buck."

"Come on out of the brush, kid. We'll talk while we ride. This place isn't too healthy for me."

"I . . . I can't ride, Buck. I'm hurt . . . I bin shot, Buck."

THERE was a bullet hole in the fleshy part of Guy's thigh, so Buck discovered when he had made a hasty examination by match light. The young fellow's face was drawn with pain, but his eyes were brave and he gamely tried to grin.

Buck started to help Guy up.

"You can tell me how you got this some time later on, kid. The main idea right now is to get you home and to bed, and get that hole swabbed out."

"I'll git home, Buck. I'll tell you what I found out down on the edge of the badlands, then you ride along. I'll hail the first farmer and he'll take me home. Gosh, after me bein' shot, this nester colony is no place for you to be found by Eric and his cronies. They'll kill yuh, Buck."

"I reckon not, kid. You let me worry about that. Here, put your arm around my neck. That's it. Lucky I'm ridin' Starlight. He'll pack double. Up you go, old man. I'll ride behind and hold yuh on."

So Buck took Guy Jones home. Guy's wife, after the first shock that drained the blood from her rosy cheeks, took her husband's accident calmly enough. She heated water and fashioned bandages from clean white sheets. Buck mixed a carbolic solution and bathed the wound. It was a clean hole, made by a steel-nosed bullet.

Guy fainted and Buck worked swiftly before the boy regained consciousness. He had just finished his task, there in the bedroom, when he heard men's voices outside. He easily recognized the voice of Eric Swanson. Eric was demanding of Guy's wife where her husband had hidden Buck Rawlins. They had seen Buck's horse standing outside the cabin.

"Where is he, Olga? We want him!"

"Eric Swanson," said Guy's bride firmly, "this house is Guy's house and mine. If Buck Rawlins is here, then he is welcome here under this roof and you have no right talking that way to me. Buck Rawlins has always been Guy's friend. He is welcome in this house."

"Buck Rawlins tried to break up the meeting tonight. He pulled a gun and threatened to kill us. Unless you let us in, then we'll class Guy with the cattlemen. I've never trusted him, anyhow. He's been acting queer around the camps. I sent word in to the Murdock sheep ranch. I sent word in to Bill Murdock that Guy ain't tendin' to his job. He ain't been to the camps for two days. He's over on the 7UP range, I bet. Now you let this Rawlins hide behind your skirts, hey?"

"If there wasn't a lady present, Swanson," said Buck hotly, "I'd knock a few teeth down your throat."

"You?" Eric laughed with an ugly sound. "I break you in two, you fool. With these two hands I break your back."

Buck unbuckled his gun belt and laid it and his six-shooter on the table. He flexed the muscles of the arm that had

not yet fully healed. He had carried it in a sling made of a black neckscarf which he now took off and laid beside the gun. Then he stepped outside.

Eric Swanson's companions had found a couple of lanterns. They now formed a circle. Buck sized up the blond giant with a sinking heart. Eric had stripped off his shirt and undershirt and now stood there, his splendid muscles rippling. Buck, though no lightweight, looked puny by comparison. And he was sadly handicapped by having only one good arm.

Eric rushed him. A smile of confidence on his red face, Buck sidestepped and hooked a vicious right into the Swede's mid-section. He figured that to be the big nester's weak spot.

Eric grunted, whirled, and with a snarling "Yah!" he smashed a big fist at Buck's wounded shoulder. He had done that deliberately. Buck ducked and danced back. That sledge-hammer blow had been like a dull knife stabbing hilt deep into the healing wound. The terrific pain made him sick and faint. He felt the warm blood burst from the reopened wound.

Now Eric rushed again. Buck, covering desperately, tried to get out of the way. He might have succeeded had not a farmer tripped him. Buck went sprawling. With a victorious, snarling laugh, Eric was about to kick the fallen man when something happened.

A man on horseback had jumped his mount through the ring of farmers. Before Eric Swanson's heavy hobnailed shoe could smash the cowpuncher, a strong hand reached down, grabbed the big Swede by the hair and flung him, yelping with pain, backward. Now the horseman was on the ground.

"My scrap, Buck. Back to the sidelines." And Bill Murdock, for it was he, squared off to meet Eric.

Buck, sick and groggy, got to his feet. Bill Murdock grinned at him now—crookedly.

"Not because I have any fondness for you, Mister 7UP, but because even a lousy sheepherder has a sense of fair play. Come on and get what you have coming to you, Swanson."

"I don't fight against my boss," muttered Eric.

"I'm not your boss, you big cheese. I fired you about half a minute ago. Fight, you big bum."

With the swift footwork of a pugilist, Bill Murdock stepped forward. Once, twice, his open hands smacked the face of the farmer. Then, poised on the balls of his feet, he smashed a beautiful left to the Swede's nose. Blood spurted. Eric, blinded by the quick pain, shook his head as if to clear it of pain. Bill had stepped back to where Buck stood.

"How's that for tapping the claret, cowboy?"

"Sometimes," said Buck, "when you do something like this, it's hard to smell sheep on yuh. You saved my bacon and I . . . Watch him, Bill!"

Eric, pretending to be dizzy, had staggered a little. Then he rushed, big fists cocked. Bill did not give an inch. Evenly matched for size and weight, their big bodies crashed together with a terrific force. Bill Murdock grinned into the blood-smeared face of the farmer as they swayed together, locked in vise-like clinch.

"I'll teach you a few manners, Swanson, before I finish. And a trick or two. How do you like this, big boy?" Bill's right arm had somehow broken the Swede's hold. It swung in a short, vicious arc, landing on the bleeding nose. With a howl of pain, Eric staggered back.

Bill danced free and with two open-handed blows, so loud that his hand against the other's cheek sounded like a pistol shot, he rocked Eric's head. Then, as the farmer covered his face, Bill stepped up, lifted an uppercut into Eric's middle. The farmer, gasping for breath, doubled up. Bill slid around behind him and kicked him with playful but painful force, in the seat of his bob overalls. Eric went forward on his face.

Some well-meaning friend stepped forward. Bill grabbed the man by the waistband of his trousers and flung him ten feet, so that he crashed into others. Now Bill handed Buck a .45.

"Keep 'em out of it, Buck. I'm not finished with this plow-pusher."

And as the crowd stood back, Bill let Eric get to his feet. He slapped the farmer's face a dozen times, until Eric was sobbing and blubbering and begging for mercy. Finally Bill gave him a final kick in the overalls and grinned.

"Take him home, the rest of you. And whenever you get snuffy and think about doing battle, take a look at the nose that Swanson will wear from now on. Now drift, the pack of yuh."

WHEN they had taken the sobbing Eric and departed, Bill Murdock turned to Buck. Buck handed Bill his gun.

"That was doggoned white of you, Bill."

"You simply furnished me with an excuse to do something I've been itching to do for some time. Keep the change, 7UP. Is Guy at home?"

"He is. And he's got a bullet hole in his leg."

"One of Hook's bullets?"

"Dunno. I was just patchin' the kid up when the sod-busters showed up."

Bill Murdock looked hard at Buck, who returned his stare. Enemies from boyhood, yet they fought in the open and respected the other's courage and spirit of fair play.

"Well, Buck, got anything to say?"

"About what?"

"About the man that shot you in the wing?"

"Not yet. Only it's hard to make myself believe that Angus Murdock did it."

"Well, let it ride like that, then," said Bill. "If you don't mind, I'll talk to Guy before you see him again. He's working for me and there might be some things I don't want the 7UP to know. Get me?"

"I'd be thick-skulled if I didn't. Go on in and see him. But tell his wife to fetch out my gun and what's left of the bandages. The Eric white hope sure opened up the old scratch."

"Come into the house and we'll patch you up, then."

While Guy's wife bandaged Buck's shoulder, Bill Murdock talked to Guy behind a closed door. Bill came out as the bandaging was finished.

"I've been telling Mrs. Jones," said Buck, "that we're mighty sorry about pulling off this ruckus in her front yard. She's sure mighty decent about it."

"I don't like Eric Swanson," said the girl simply. "I never have liked him. And here of late my father is not quite so fond of him. Two or three times my sister has all but told me that her married life is not any bed of roses. And they've been married only a week or two.

"Eric did all he could to prevent my marriage to Guy. He influenced father, too. That's why Guy and I ran away and got married. No, Eric got just what he needed. But it won't do him a bit of good. It will make him all the more bitter toward the stockmen. I'll tell you this, Mr. Murdock, now that you've broken with him, that Eric has not been the friend he pretends to be. He dislikes you almost as he does Buck Rawlins."

Bill nodded and lit his pipe. "So I figured all along. And that's my only regret. I would have kept him on as camp tender. He's been watched ever since I hired him. So, for that matter, has Guy Jones. But Guy was watched for a different reason. The man watching Guy was supposed to keep the kid from having such an accident as has befallen him. But Guy gave him the slip, not knowing who he was. Mrs. Jones, you are married to a mighty brave-hearted chap. If Buck Rawlins and I had that boy's principles and ideals, there'd be no quarrel between us." He shook his head.

"FOR once, sheepherder," said Buck Rawlins, "I can sure agree with you. Guy's one straight-shooter."

"Yes, and he's one game rooster, 7UP. Trot in and see him while Mrs. Jones and I have a little business meeting."

Buck sat on the edge of the wounded boy's bed. "Two cripples, kid. Birds of a feather. Now give me the yarn about how you got plugged."

He grinned.

"I'm sorry, Buck, but I can't. Bill made me promise I'd keep shut about it all. But I'm goin' to tell you this much. The man that shot Joe Phelps was not Angus Murdock. And the man that shot you the night of the prairie fire was not old Angus. He's plumb innocent. Now don't ask me any more. Bill has bin awful white to me, Buck. He's goin' to help me a lot more. Fact is, he aims to stake me in the sheep business. I'll take a band on shares and quit this farmin'. I got a few hundred dollars saved to put into the deal. It's my big chance, Buck, even if it is sheep I'm handlin'."

"Don't let that bother you, kid. There's worse things than sheep, even if I can't call any to mind right now. And if Bill Murdock says keep shut, you keep shut. I'm askin' only one question. Was it Hook that plugged yuh?"

"No. No, it wasn't. He'd have done a better job of it. Nope, I was shot by the same gent that killed Joe Phelps and tried to kill you. That's all I kin say."

And it was with that bit of puzzling news that Buck Rawlins rode back to the Rolling M ranch that night.

XII

ONION JONES had seen a ghost. At the edge of the bad-lands, in plain sight against the evening skyline, he had seen this ghost. No wraithlike, filmy thing that dissolved into thin air. But a burly, thick-necked, blunt-jawed image of a man who had been dead for fifteen years and more. The flesh-and-blood ghost of that dead man stood with a rifle in his hands, leaning with his broad back against a rimrock.

Onion lowered the field-glasses through the powerful lenses of which he had seen this ghost of a man who had been long dead. His leathery old face betrayed nothing of the emotions that surged through his body. He even smiled at Mazie West, who was finishing the last bacon sandwich they had brought with them.

"See anything important through those overgrown opera-glasses, Onion?"

"Nothin' of any value." He squinted up at the sun. "Time we started fer camp, I reckon. It'll be dark, time we git there."

Together they started for the camp at 7UP Springs. There were times when Mazie West tired of her ancient guardian that guarded her welfare. Onion's odd brand of humor, his wheezy proverbs, his tales of the old West, became rather monotonous. Mazie wanted to be alone. Her only hours of solitude came with nightfall when Onion retired to his canvas tepee down the creek from her camp.

Now, as the slanting rays of the setting sun painted the peaks in ever-changing colors, the girl wanted to ride alone with her thoughts. She wanted to dream foolish, impossible dreams. She wanted to lose herself in those dreams. Braving the chance of hurting old Onion's feelings, she now asked him if he'd mind awfully if she rode on alone.

"Nary a bit," he agreed readily. "You ride on ahead. I'll foller bimeby. Fact is, there was a varmint down there in the breaks that I ketched sight of and I'd like tuh see this varmint closer."

"A wolf, Onion?"

"Kind of a cross between a wolf and a coyote. I'll ketch yuh after a while."

Onion turned back from there. True, Buck had told him to keep a close watch over the nester gal, but shucks, she was travelin' a plain road and no chance to git lost. He'd ketch her before she reached camp. And he shore was honin' fer tuh sight that gent at close range. Over a pair of gun sights, if the play come up right.

"BIG DRUMMOND," Onion muttered over and over as he trailed back the way he had come from the point from which he had sighted the man. "Big Drummond, as was killed in Wyomin'. Hook killed him there on Powder River and the wolves et his carcass. I seen the bones, later. Big Drummond, er my eyes is seein' plumb wrong. Drummond, as fought on the other side. As low-down and ornery a killer as ever bushwhacked a cowboy.

"Some older lookin', a heap changed, but I'd know him a hundred years from now. And when he held his head fust one side, then on the other, fer all the world like a dawg a-listenin', there was no mistakin' him. That cuss is Big Drummond and whatever he's a-doin' here, it's bad."

Onion rode with caution. With Big Drummond in the country, it stood a man in hand to ride careful. Drummond had a bad habit of shooting and doing his talking later. Last Onion had seen of him, Big Drummond had been leaning back against the shelving rimrock, a rifle in the crook of his arm. Like he was watching somebody.

Supposing Big Drummond had come here hunting Hook? Hook had done his best to kill the big gunman, back there on Powder River. It would be just like Big Drummond to trail Hook to Montana,

watch for his chance, then plug him. Bust Hook's spine with a bullet and tell it scary to Hook as he laid there dying. That was Big Drummond's way. Skulking, like a yellow-backed coyote. Shooting from the bush.

Onion wondered if Big Drummond could be the roughneck leader of the nester gang that had tortured Old Mary. The same big tough gent that had got gay with the West gal and had bin run off by Buck Rawlins. Mebbyso. That was about Drummond's style. A big-mouthed bully and coward. Onion wished he'd given the little West gal a look through the glasses at the big son-of-a-gun.

Now, from down in the bad-lands, came the faint crack of a rifle shot, echoing into silence. Onion pulled up abruptly, his hand on his gun. That shot had come from a distance but there might be other men in these hills just aching to take a shot at a 7UP cowboy. Onion reckoned that Big Drummond was the man who had fired that shot.

He stood in his stirrups, his eyes dancing with excitement. If Big Drummond craved fighting, Onion 'lowed he'd give the big son a bellyful. He'd learn the big bushwhacker a trick or two. He'd . . .

"Hold up, mister!" barked a voice. Half a dozen men with leveled rifles surrounded Onion. They had the drop. Six to one for odds and all of them dangerous enough looking.

Onion swore softly as he raised his hands. This was the gang that had stopped at Old Mary's and abused her. This was the gang that was stirring up all the trouble. This was the gang that followed the leadership of Big Drummond. Six to one for odds and their guns cocked. One or two of 'em looked half drunk, to boot.

"What's the game, boys?" grinned Onion. "Mebby I'll buy a stack uh chips."

"Yeh?" jeered one of them. "You old fossil, you bin on the shelf gatherin' dust for forty years. You buy chips in our game? That's a hot one, that is. Keep them hands up, you old persimmon. Shoot his ears off, boys, if he gets gay. I hope he makes a play for his cannon, just to give you boys target practice."

"Is this the sucker the boss told us to earmark?" asked another.

"Naw. This is the old fool they call Onion. The boss knowed him somewhere before. He wants us tuh fetch him into camp all in one piece so he kin work him over in his own way."

"Who is your danged boss?" asked Onion crisply. His temper was on edge and while he knew himself to be outmatched, still he was makng up his mind to go out fighting. He knew the answer to his bland question. He was simply stalling for time, waiting for that rare break that would let him reach for his gun and turn this into a short, deadly fight.

"The boss? We calls him Big Meat. You'll know him when yuh see him. He works for . . ."

"Shut the gab, fool!" snarled the man next to the half-drunken man who was about to become loquacious. "Wanta queer the game?"

"Big Meat's gonna croak this guy," put in another man, championing the drunken one, "so what's the odds? This guy ain't gonna do no talkin' after today."

He spat.

Onion looked them over with frank curiosity. They were not of the cowpuncher clan, these men. Jailbirds, toughs, the scum of city gutters and the product of the hop joints. Onion had seen their type around the gambling houses at Havre and Butte. They made the mining camps that were on the boom and followed the sheep-shearing crews to gamble. Covering their real game with labor in the mines or shearing pens, they worked their cards and dice and when their game was discovered, fought their way out.

ON foot, the six surrounded Onion, who sat his horse, his eyes hard and unafraid. He was thinking of Mazie West. If these men had been watching him, then they had also been watching the girl. Now she was riding home alone and unprotected, at the mercy of Big Drummond should he choose to follow her.

Now, as the old cowpuncher tensed, ready to make a desperate gun play, his quick eyes caught sight of something that revived hope in his heart. From a butte spotted with scrub pines there rose a thin column of smoke. For an instant the smoke rose like a gray column into the windless sky. Then it was gone. Now

it came again. A third time. Then it vanished.

Onion Oliver relaxed, his heart pounding with hope. He knew that signal and the man who had made it. He knew that it was meant for him. From that butte a man with field-glasses could see Onion and these toughs. His hands in the air, Onion watched the men who stood there on the ground.

"Gents," he said, grinning gamely, "you shore got me. I'm yore bacon. And I'll go along plenty peaceful. I'm just an ol' bald-headed jasper as is past his prime o' life and playin' hookey from the boothill. When I cash in my chips, I'll do 'er without regret. I've seen a-plenty fer one man tuh see, done about all there is tuh do, anyhow. When that boss uh yourn hangs this ol' hide on the fence, he ain't doin' much to be braggin' about.

"Reminds me uh the story about ol' Poker Davis. He was a desert rat and had hunted fer gold in about every country from Nome tuh South Africa. He strikes 'er rich down in Sonora an' he's . . ."

"Never mind the story, ol'-timer," said the man who seemed to be in charge. "Tell it tuh Big Meat. Boys, take his artillery. That's it. Now you kin pull yore hands down outa the sky."

Onion obeyed that order with a sigh of relief. But as he had been talking, his elevated hands had been slowly moving in a crude semaphore signal. Slowly, so that the motion would not attract notice, Onion Oliver had waved three times. Now, as a single puff of smoke appeared, then dissolved on top of the butte, the old cowpuncher knew that the man up there on the butte, the man known as The Nighthawk, had seen the signaled reply to his smoke sign. The Nighthawk was watching and would do what he could to rescue old Onion.

Now the band of hired toughs and their prisoner went down a steep trail that led into a box canyon. At the foot of the trail a man with a carbine halted them. He recognized them and passed them on. And not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did Onion Oliver betray the fact that he recognized this guard as one of The Nighthawk's crew of outlaws.

At the corral there in the canyon Big Drummond met them. He leered at old Onion with loose-lipped, ugly triumph.

"Long time no see yuh, Oliver. I've bin waitin' to have a nice long pow-wow with yuh. We'll drink from the keg and have a medicine smoke, me and you. Old reunion, eh, Onion? A last an' final reunion. It's yore last night on this old earth, Onion, and I aim tuh make 'er shore pleasant.

"Light, yuh bald-headed old skalawag, and rest yore saddle. Come on to the cabin and we'll talk over old times and old friends. Such as ol' Hook Jones as he now calls hisse'f, and some others. And before we commence this augerin' deal, lemme tell yuh somethin'. That yaller-haired gal is locked up in the next cabin. If yuh don't tell me the right answers to a few questions, it'll be her misfortune."

BIG DRUMMOND poured two tin cups full of raw whisky. Onion smacked his lips and accepted his drink. He knew that Big Drummond was feeding him the hard liquor in hopes of loosening his tongue. The two were alone in the small log cabin.

Next to his cabin was the one where Mazie West had been put. Onion heard her whistling in there behind the padlocked door and barred windows. The girl was whistling to keep up her courage. The old cowpuncher was mighty proud of her. She was game, that young 'un. Big Drummond had likewise heard her whistle. He grinned crookedly.

"So long as you talk like I want yuh to talk, Onion, the gal will be safe. But if yuh don't come clean with me, then she won't have such good luck. We got orders to hold her here fer two weeks. That'll be cut to shorter time if she signs some papers the boss sent."

"Marley shore wants that homestead at 7UP Springs, don't he?"

"Who said anything about Marley?" growled Big Drummond.

"I did. I ain't plumb dumb, Drummond. Here's a sty on yore eye, Big Meat." Onion chuckled and lifted his cup.

Big Drummond, sometimes called Big Meat, leered at Onion across his cup of whisky.

"Where's Hook Jones?" The big man snarled the question.

"That," said Onion frankly, "is what I'd give a lot to know. He left Landusky the day of his wife's funeral. He ain't bin seen since. They tell me he acted plumb loco."

THEY drained their tin cups and Big Meat filled them to the brim with the fiery whisky. Now Onion knew that the big man had a dual purpose in hitting the liquor. He wanted Onion to talk, for one thing. And now Onion suddenly remembered a habit of Big Drummond's. Sober, the man lacked the courage to carry out any real crime. Whisky gave the man nerve and dulled his qualms of conscience. He was now deliberately getting drunk enough to kill Onion and take the nester girl against Marley's orders. Already an ugly glint was creeping into the big man's eyes.

"Onion," he said, his eyes slitted and his voice a low snarl, "where's The Nighthawk hidin' and where did they cache the money they stole? I want the truth outa yuh er I'll twist that hairless head off that skinny neck uh yourn. You know the right answer tuh both them questions and I'll take nothin' but the truth. Come clean, yuh mangy ol' son!"

Onion choked a little over his cup. He wanted to get the effects of that whisky. With its glowing warmth creeping over him, Onion felt loose of tongue and nimble of wit. Tipsy, Onion Oliver was as convincing a liar as ever spilled a windy yarn. If only he could acquire that stage of mellowness, he could, perhaps, trick this ugly brute into some sort of trap. Onion drained the cup and reached for cigaret makin's.

"Some uh the money is gone," he told Big Drummond. The whisky was warming his stomach now, sending through his veins that delicious warmth that makes a man forget that he is hungry or cold or broke.

"Yep, some uh the money is gone. Spent fer this and that. But there's a-plenty left. Not enough tuh split up amongst this gang uh bums yuh got workin' fer yuh. But if one man had it all, say, he'd be fixed fer life unless he throwed it away."

"Think I'd split with these tramps?" grinned Big Meat. "Not much. Where's the stuff hid, Onion?"

"I kin take yuh to where a part of it is, but I dunno as I could tell yuh the location er even map it on paper. It's in a tin box that was put in under a cutbank and then the cutbank was caved in on it. And there's more hid in an old badger hole near the lone cottonwood on Second Crick. And another dab is wrapped in a slicker and planted in the road where a lot uh hosses and wagons and freight outfits has passed over it.

"You know how *you* would hide, say, five thousand dollars. Yuh'd pick the right spot. And even if I was tuh be tied to a stake an' set on fire, I couldn't give yuh any map uh the spot. I couldn't tell any man how tuh find it. There's that cutbank. There's that badger hole. There's that place dug in the main stage road. How kin I tell any man the ex-act location? Big Meat, she cain't be done. Nope. I'd have tuh be with yuh."

"LOOKY here, Onion," said Big Drummond, a wheedling note in his voice, "there'd be enough fer two of us in them caches. While me and you have bin on wrong sides, still, we ain't got any real grudge between us. How'd yuh like to throw in with me? We'll quit this layout, dig up that money, and pull stakes fer the Argentine country. I'll quit this gang.

"You ain't beholdin' to The Nighthawk ner the other. Anyhow, they'll be out like Nellie's eye before long when the Marley gang gits 'em pocketed. That Marley is a smart gent. He's got book learnin' and he's as slick as a new-born calf. He's gonna run the big outfits out. Then, bimeby, when the nesters feels the blizzards and droughts an' go broke, he'll take over their homesteads fer nothin' excep' their carfare home. Him and Howard Snodgrass is gonna own this whole dang country. But me and fellers like me that's takin' the big risks will be sluffed into the discard. I want mine while the sign is right. You string yore bets with mine, Onion, and we'll both be a-wearin' diamonds. You lead me to where them caches is and we'll drift yonderly. Want that game?"

"She sounds shore sweet music to my

ears, Big Meat. Let's tilt another 'un. I git dry a-talkin'. Here's tuh crime in general an' fleas in yore blankets."

Half an hour, during which Onion Oliver and Big Meat Drummond conjured up oral visions of Buenos Aires and other points south.

It was Big Drummond who first noticed that something was wrong in camp. Big Meat Drummond, filling the two tin cups from the jug, happened to look up at the window. Inside the cabin was candlelight. Outside was darkness. But not too dark for the big man to see that someone was standing out there by the window. A man with a handkerchief tied across his face, masking all save a pair of slitted eyes. In the hands of the masked man were two guns. Both these guns were pointed at Big Meat, who now stood there, his hands slowly lifting.

Onion looked at the big man, followed Big Meat's staring eyes to the man at the window. Onion chuckled softly and stepping in behind Big Meat, lifted the fellow's guns.

"Be quiet, Big Meat," he said in a low tone. "Be awful quiet and peaceful, because I'm rearin' tuh kill yuh here an' now. My pardner outside feels the same way to'rd yuh. So just keep yore paws in the air while I frisk yuh fer the key to the cabin where yuh got the nester gal locked up. Behave, big feller, er yo're gonna be in hell in plenty time fer breakfast."

XIII

IT was The Nighthawk himself who stepped into the cabin with Onion Oliver and Big Meat. Across the lower part of his face was the black silk handkerchief. Above it, his eyes glittered. He motioned Big Meat back into his chair.

"Onion," he said softly, "here's that ol' cedar-handled hog-laig of yours. I took it off the tramp that took it away from you. Supposin' you unlock the door uh the next cabin. Fetch the girl in here. I want to hear and be witness while we make this big cuss talk."

Onion was back in a few minutes, Mazie West hanging to his arm as if she were afraid he might leave her again. This was probably one of the proudest moments of the old cowpuncher's life.

"That's the big pun'kin roller there, Onion," she said hotly, pointing at Big Meat Drummond, "that brought me here. He said that you were hurt and was askin' for me. The big bum. He's the same heavy character that Buck Rawlins slapped to a peak at my camp. He's Creighton Marley's tough guy. He's the guy that pushed the bull off the bridge, the guy that lives in the last house at the toughest end of tough street. He's a ten-minute egg, he is. I bet he's kicked the crutches out from under more cripples than any bird alive. He's the type that slaps kids and beats up women. He's a heel, no less."

The Nighthawk's eyes twinkled. "The little lady reads you like a gypsy reading a palm. Drummond, you'll talk now and you'll talk plenty fast. I want the names of the men behind Marley. I hope you kin put out the correct answer, because if yuh don't yo're due for some hard luck. Who pays Marley?"

"The Northwest Land and Finance Company pays Marley."

"And who owns the Northwest Land and Finance Company?" asked The Nighthawk.

"Some dudes in Helena, near as I know. Howard Snodgrass and Marley own stock in the layout. They got plenty money behind 'em and they're locatin' nesters on the best land they kin pick where it'll hurt the big outfits. They got 'er planned to grab off the best land here, force the big outfits into a cheap sale, buy up the 7UP and Rolling M outfits fer cheap money, then grab the homesteads that the nesters will have to let go of when they can't make a livin' off the dry land. I heard Marley say they'd own the whole country in ten years. They're powerful, I'll tell a man."

"Mebbyso. Mebby not as powerful as they figger," said The Nighthawk. He turned to the girl.

"Lady, it's time that you and my friend Onion was hittin' the trail for home. Better if both of you didn't come down here in the bad-lands again. Tell Buck Rawlins and Dave and Bob Driscoll that I kin ride line on the proposition down here. Ma'am, I reckon this big rattlesnake has bin somewhat insultin'. Well, he won't bother you no more. He's givin' hisself a

necktie party tonight. Sorry yuh can't be there, but this is what society calls a stag party. Take a last look at 'im."

"I don't think I quite get the idea," said Mazie West.

"He's aimin' to hang me," said Big Drummond, his voice husky with fear.

THE nester girl looked at the three men. Above the black silk neckscarf The Nighthawk's eyes were cold and merciless. Onion looked uneasy under her scrutiny. Big Drummond was plainly afraid. The fear of death was in the big man's eyes, and he licked his heavy lips with a dry tongue.

"This man," said the girl, her voice sounding pitifully brave against the ugly silence there in the dimly lit cabin, "has done nothing to me that calls for hanging. He's a big bum, but outside of that, he's not hurt me enough to make me want to see him hung. Can't we call it a day, boys?"

"This Big Meat gent," Onion put in, his voice somewhat apologetic, "is a rattlesnake. He's gotta be tromped out, ma'am."

"He's no worse than the men he works for," said Mazie stoutly. "And if this necktie party is bein' staged on my account, forget it. Pass out rain checks or somethin'. How do you think I'd feel if I had to go around from now on knowin' that a man had been hung because he'd looked sideways at me? You don't need to say it with guns or a rope around some poor yap's neck. I know I owe you a lot, but I won't leave this cabin till you tell me this big hunk of Camembert is safe."

For a long, tense moment, Mazie West looked at the unmasked Nighthawk whose name had once been Wade Hardin. Her face went white as chalk and she gripped the edge of the table as if to keep from falling.

"You?" she said in a barely audible voice. "You?"

The Nighthawk nodded, his mouth, thin-lipped, bitter, spreading in a smile that was not pleasant.

"I figured yuh'd be surprised," he said slowly. Both he and the girl seemed to forget where they were or why they were there. They stood facing one another across the table.

Now Big Meat Drummond took his one chance. His big hand shot out, knocking over the candles that stood in the necks of beer bottles on the pine table. The cabin was plunged in darkness. Onion was sent crashing to the floor under the terrific impact of Drummond's fists. The next moment Big Meat was outside.

Shots crashed there in the darkened cabin as The Nighthawk shot at random aim, hoping to stop the big man's flight. Now, outside, other shots rang out. Men shouted hoarsely. The thud of shod hoofs as Drummond rode at a mad pace into the night.

NOW the fighting in the darkness became swift and furious. Mazie West felt the grip of The Nighthawk's arms as he pushed her into a sheltered corner, his body shielding her as he jerked the hammers of two six-shooters. Now, outside the cabin, sounded the wild yell of a cowboy. That would be one of The Nighthawk's men voicing his battle cry as he fought against Big Meat's men.

"I gotta be leavin' yuh here," The Nighthawk said in a hoarse whisper. "You lay low while Onion and me do some cap-bustin'. Sorry I give yuh such a shock, kid, but I wanted yuh to know. . . ."

"To know that you'll be swinging at the end of a rope before you're done. Gee, what swell breaks I get outa this life. Just when I'm patchin' up the old heart. . . ."

The Nighthawk picked her up and set her down none too gently. "Keep quiet, kid, and stay down there on the floor. Them shots is comin' close. Onion, where are yuh?"

"Right here, dang it. Let's git some action." Onion took shape in the dim light that came through the window that was now broken by bullets.

Now Onion and The Nighthawk were outside, crouched in the black shadows of the cabin wall. Dodging, shooting, keeping the cabin defended as best they could, as Big Drummond's toughs raked the night with gunfire. The outlaw under The Nighthawk's command was putting up a good fight. Onion Oliver's gun spewed fire. The outlaw leader was squatted behind the woodpile, raking the brush with leaden hail. No sign of Big Meat Drummond. Now The Nighthawk crawled over

to where Onion Oliver, cussing and shooting, crouched behind a shallow cutbank. He spoke hurriedly.

"I got two horses hid behind the cabin, Onion. You and the girl use 'em while me and Ben hold off these skunks."

"Me leave here now, jest when I'm a-gittin' warmed up?" Onion complained in a husky whisper. "Not by a dang sight. Bin a long time since I celebrated a holiday. She's my night tuh play Fourth uh July."

"We got no time to argue. Do like I say."

Onion remembered there in the cabin before Big Meat knocked out the lights, the look in Mazie West's eyes when she saw The Nighthawk's face.

"You and the gal drift yonderly," said Onion. "I dunno what else yuh are but yo're shore mighty strong in the li'l' gal's heart. Hop to it."

"She wouldn't travel ten feet with me. Do like I say, Onion, and quit runnin' off at the head. Shake a leg."

Onion, muttering, did as he was bid. Mazie West, crouched on the floor in a corner of the cabin, listened meekly to Onion's advice.

"Better do as he says, ma'am. He knows what's best."

"I'll admit this is no place for a lady and my being here makes it hard on you he-boys. I'll go. But if Wade Hardin don't make a try at squaring himself I hope he has bad luck, that's all. Lead on, Onion."

Getting the horses was no small task. It required all the Injun tricks that Onion knew. It was nearly half an hour before they could get in the saddle.

"All set?" whispered Onion.

"Give the word. All for one and one for me, as the third musketeer said, wiping his trusty sword on his pants leg. let's go."

"Lay low along yore pony's neck. Ride like you was goin' to a fire an' let me do the shootin'. Here we go!"

ONION in front, his horse on a run. Behind him rode Mazie West. Horses kicking gravel. Onion's six-shooter belching fire. Now they were climbing the trail. Fifteen minutes and they had gained safety. Below, there in the black canyon, sounded shots as The Nighthawk and Ben fought back Big Meat Drummond's toughs. Then, after a time, Onion Oliver and the nester girl had reached the head of the breaks and were riding across the rolling prairie.

"Big Meat," said Onion, rolling a cigaret, "has done quit the flats. He's headed fer Chinook, if I figger right. How do yuh like 'er out West by this time, as far as yuh've gone?"

"Not so bad, not so good. Onion, I have to get into town as quick as I can. I'm leaving this land of the great open spaces to them that like raw meat and beans. I'm quitting, Onion. I'm going back where I belong and where I should have stayed."

"Yes, ma'am."

"He can hunt me up where he first found me, darn him."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And when he finds me, I'll teach him a lesson in manners, what I mean. Nobody can make a sucker outa me. Out here where he can strut his stuff, he may be the main idea, but he'll find out that he can't make me out a chump. What's his idea in wearin' that black rag across his map, anyhow? Who does he think he is, Jesse James?"

"Meanin' yuh don't know who he is?"

"He's Wade Hardin and he's all wet in my estimation. He put on a show tonight that was worth the price of admission, but that don't explain away why he fools a girl with his hot line about a ranch home where a gal can raise chickens and a duck and some kittens and a dog and have roses in a garden and a white cottage with a green roof and morning glory vines growing over the porch. I let him feed me that line of stuff when he's with that Wild West show in Chicago and I fall hard for his boots and big hat and his cowboy ways.

"Then, when I get ready to leave the show flat and let it go bust because Mazie West in the pony ballet is givin' up the two-a-day stuff for a little gray home in the West, what does he do but take a powder on me. He leaves me waitin' at the church. Leaves me with my orange blossoms withering and my dreams all shot to pieces. That's what he does. Now he pulls this fast one to

inject some drama into the act. He don't fool me. Onion, that whole show was a frame-up. It lacked the right management to put it over. Thanks for a swell evening and I'll say you had me goin'. But now I see it was all just a lot of old hokum. I'm goin' home on the first train."

"You mean yuh knowed Wade Hardin when he rode broncs with the rodeo outfits? When he was the World's champeen bronc setter? Yuh met him in Chicago?"

"I did, and how. I fell for him hard. Ten years ago, and then some, near as I recall. Me just a kid breakin' into the show game."

"And him the best cowboy that ever set a bronc comin' out of the chutes. Goshamighty! Wade Hardin, when he had the world by the tail. When he was top-hand uh all the contest boys. When he could rope, ride, er dog a steer with the best of 'em. When him an' Clay McGonigal an' Henry Gammar an' Lee Robinson was knockin' on broncs' an' swingin' the fastest loops in the world. Yeah, Wade sat up amongst the kings them days. And it was right in Chicago that he quit the game an' hit the outlaw trail. Yeppy, right there in Chicago Wade Hardin cut his string an' from then on he's known amongst friends, enemies an' strangers as The Nighthawk."

"WHAT do you mean, The Nighthawk?"

"That's what we call him now. He's outlawed. He's. . . ."

"He's The Nighthawk that held up the train I was on? You mean that Wade is The Nighthawk?" Mazie's voice quivered a little.

"Yes, ma'am. And fer all they got a price on him, he's as square a man as ever helped a friend in a tight. I shore hate tuh hear yuh speak bad about that cowboy. He's all white."

"He give me a run-around. Gee, The Nighthawk. Then tonight's show was the real thing?"

Onion Oliver smiled grimly. "What did yuh think it was, circus day?"

"I . . . Gee, I didn't know. I was knocked groggy. Kidnapped, listenin' to a guy get sentenced to hang. Then the heavy guy turns out to be the cowboy that left me waitin' at the church door in a new dress that I kid myself into thinkin' is my bridal gown. What is any gal going to think? He stood me up once and that was plenty. I'll never light no more joss sticks in front of any guy's picture. Onion, I'm goin' back to my old act."

"Yo're quittin' the homestead at 7UP Springs?"

"My bank book shows a balance of one hundred and two dollars and six-bits. I'm usin' it all on a ticket home. That's final. I'll stake you to that homestead and the good-will that goes with it. You've acted like a champ and whenever you hit Chicago, look me up. I'll show you the town. Out here I'm just a sucker, but back in my own back yard I can get by on a plugged dime.

"I've covered many a hole in a silk stocking with ink. I've scoffed on slim groceries cooked on a gas jet. I've walked Broadway in December with paper in my slippers to keep my bare feet outa the snow.

"I can beat the game again, too. And when I'm doing my Sarah Bernhardt and bathing in buttermilk I'll start a home for these smart cowboys that feed a gal a line about the sunrise on the Rockies. I never want to see another sunrise unless I've waited up all night to get a look at it. I never want to see another horse or the two-timers that ride 'em. I never wanta . . . Onion, for the love of Pete, slip me a hanky because your nester gal is just about to weep no less than quarts. Darn!"

AS Onion Oliver told Dave Rawlins the next morning at the hotel in Chinook, after he and Mazie West had finished a long, hard ride, it was about time that the nester gal got the kind of a deal that was comin' to a woman. And so it was that Dave Rawlins and Bob Driscoll and Uncle Hank Mayberry entertained Mazie West at lunch that noon. With them went Ike Niland who had Uncle Hank Mayberry under arrest, pending the outcome of the bank examiner's findings. The sixth member of that party was Onion Oliver.

And when they had finished the fried chicken and the trimmings that went with

it, Mazie West made a short speech.

"Thanks for the two thousand dollars, for the feed, and for everything. I know I should hop the next eastbound train, but somehow I just can't. So I'm returning to Dave Rawlins my check, and we'll let the train go on without me riding the cushions. I'm just a cheap little dame from the chorus, but nobody ever called me a bum. You're all the salt of the earth and I'm for you. I'll go back to my two-by-twice ranch and I'll string my bets with yours.

"Uncle Hank, I have about a hundred bucks in the bank. Take it if you need it. And before we get finished with this Marley burglary syndicate, we'll make 'em all look like fish that have been out of the water about a week too long. I don't remember my dad but they say he was regular, even if he was a cop. And he'd be plenty ashamed if I didn't play my game straight. Whatever I can do in my own childish way, count on me to do it. Put me down as a lodge member."

XIV

SATURDAY noon the Valley Bank closed its doors. Bob Driscoll and Dave Rawlins waited at the hotel for Uncle Hank Mayberry to join them. In the big front room they occupied together, Dave Rawlins paced the floor while Bob Driscoll sat in the big easy chair, his gnarled hands folded. Bob Driscoll, during these years of darkness that had set him apart from other men, had learned patience.

"Bob, them dudes is out tuh give Hank a whuppin'," Dave Rawlins repeated for the tenth time. "Snodgrass is at the bottom of it, mark what I say. Hank ain't a-tellin' me and you everything he should. Scared he'll be worryin' us with his troubles, I reckon. I'm a-wonderin' if them notes we signed ain't somehow mixed up in the deal they're a-tryin' to hand 'im. I done sent fer Buck to git in here to town. Buck has education and plenty of savvy. Colleen might come along. We'll stand by Hank till . . . God!"

"What's wrong, Dave?"

Dave turned from the window where he had been standing. His face was hard and grim lipped.

"Bob, there's a crowd a-gatherin' at the bank. The news has done trickled out that Hank's bank is in bad shape. Some uh Marley's work, bet on that. He's aimin' tuh hang Hank's hide on the fence. That mob a-gatherin' looks bad. Bob, I reckon I'll have tuh be leavin' yuh alone fer a spell. Some uh that gang is hired by Marley. They're a mangy layout, half drunk and ugly lookin'. Yeah, they're gatherin' fast. I better step down there."

"What kin you do, Dave? You ain't allowed in the bank and yuh can't do much, single-handed, against that gang. Ike is ridin' herd on Hank and he won't stand fer any kind uh rough work. Set still fer a spell. Hank will be along directly."

"If only Buck 'ud show up. Buck's right handy at a job like this."

"He'll be along, Dave."

"Wish I had yore patience, Bob."

Dave Rawlins pulled a chair up alongside the window. From there he could see the gathering crowd around the front doors of the bank. Some of those men and women had their life's savings in the Valley Bank. Others in the crowd were the hoodlum element that was there to start any kind of trouble that would give them a chance to destroy property or hurt some one they did not like. They took their orders from Marley.

MARLEY stood in the doorway of his office. Immaculate, a thin smile twisting his mouth, his eyes watching the crowd in front of the bank. Now and then his manicured hand twisted his trim little mustache. Yet a keen observer would have read a certain vague uneasiness behind his studied calm. His hands were restless and he seemed to be listening. Now, as he stood there, a cautious voice hailed him from the back room that joined his office.

"If I'm stuck here fer the day, get me a bottle and some grub, chief."

"I have a man at the back door, Drummond," said Marley coldly. "He has orders to croak you if you try to pull a fast one. There's another guy out

in front. When you're croaked there'll be stuff planted on your unwashed carcass that will prove you were caught robbing my office. Now get that through your wooden skull, you big false alarm. I'll give you the bum's rush tonight when it's dark. You talk nice to me, you big louse, or you'll have a lily in your hand.

"I'm shipping you out on the midnight rattler with just one hundred berries in your kick. You'll take it and like it, and if you don't hop that rattler and do a fade-away, you'll be found stiff in the morning back in the alley. Now pipe down and be polite, Big Meat, or papa will spank. If you need a shot of whisky, look in the bottom drawer of the desk. Hit it light, see. You'll scoff when I get ready to send one of the boys to the Chink's for sandwiches. One more yelp out of you and you'll be caught in there robbing my office. When the law finds you, you'll be as dead as Napoleon. Think it over, mugg."

CREIGHTON MARLEY lit another cigaret and strolled back to the open doorway of his office. He cursed the luck that had made Big Meat Drummond fail so miserably. Well, the big rat would pay for his mistake before too many hours. He'd put Drummond out of the way. There was a .38 gun equipped with a silencer hidden here in the office. That rod would do the work. Drummond wouldn't be the first man that had tasted the deadly dose from that silent gun.

Now Marley's eyes narrowed a little as he spotted Eric Swanson coming down the street. Swanson, his face puffed and discolored, with several friends from the Big Warm colony. Marley had heard the story of Eric's whipping at the hands of Bill Murdock. But he knew that the beating Eric had taken had served to antagonize many of the farmers against the stockmen. Eric left his friends and crossed the street to Marley's office.

Marley faked a genial, silky smile. "What's the good word, Eric?" Need more money for the homestead?"

"I got money in that bank that I heard was going broke. You told me to bank there. What are you going to do about it?"

"You won't lose a dime. You know that, Eric. I told you when we started that I'd see you through and I'm a man of my word. It happens to be to our advantage that this bank should go bust. Now you sit tight and you'll come out on top, get me? When I withdrew my account from The Valley Bank, I took care of you. You can't lose a dime if you play with me. Where was the wreck?" Marley grinned at the big farmer.

Eric scowled darkly. "Bill Murdock double-crossed me, that's all. He's not the man I thought he was."

"I told you that, Eric. Want revenge?"

"You bet I want revenge and I'll. . . ."

"Hold it, Eric. Hold everything. Let me handle the thinking. You will get satisfaction, and how. Keep your mouth shut and follow my instructions. Now take your friends and get over there to the bank. Make 'em think you're losing your last dollar if that bank closes. Talk some, but not too much. Get the idea?"

"What about my friends, Marley?"

"Listen, Eric, I'm carrying you but I'm not carrying every half-naturalized farmer in the country. Get smart and look out for yourself. How'd you like to get hold of all that Big Warm farming land and have the jack to finance the crops? How'd you like to make more on the job as straw-boss of that whole district than you'd make out of your three hundred and twenty acres in five years? Ponder on that, brother.

"When I picked you to boss that Big Warm section, I figured you were smart. Now it's time you woke up and saw the sunrise. Let your friends and neighbors book a little losing. You're winning and I'm making you win. This can't be handled in a week or two. It takes time to put over anything that's worth the gamble, don't you see? Now you follow out my orders and I'll see that you come out on top. Play with me, brother, and you'll be the richest farmer in this country. Throw me down and I'll break you. Which way do you go, Eric?"

Creighton Marley gave the big farmer a hard look, smiled sneeringly, then turned his back on Eric Swanson and walked into his office.

Something of the worried look was

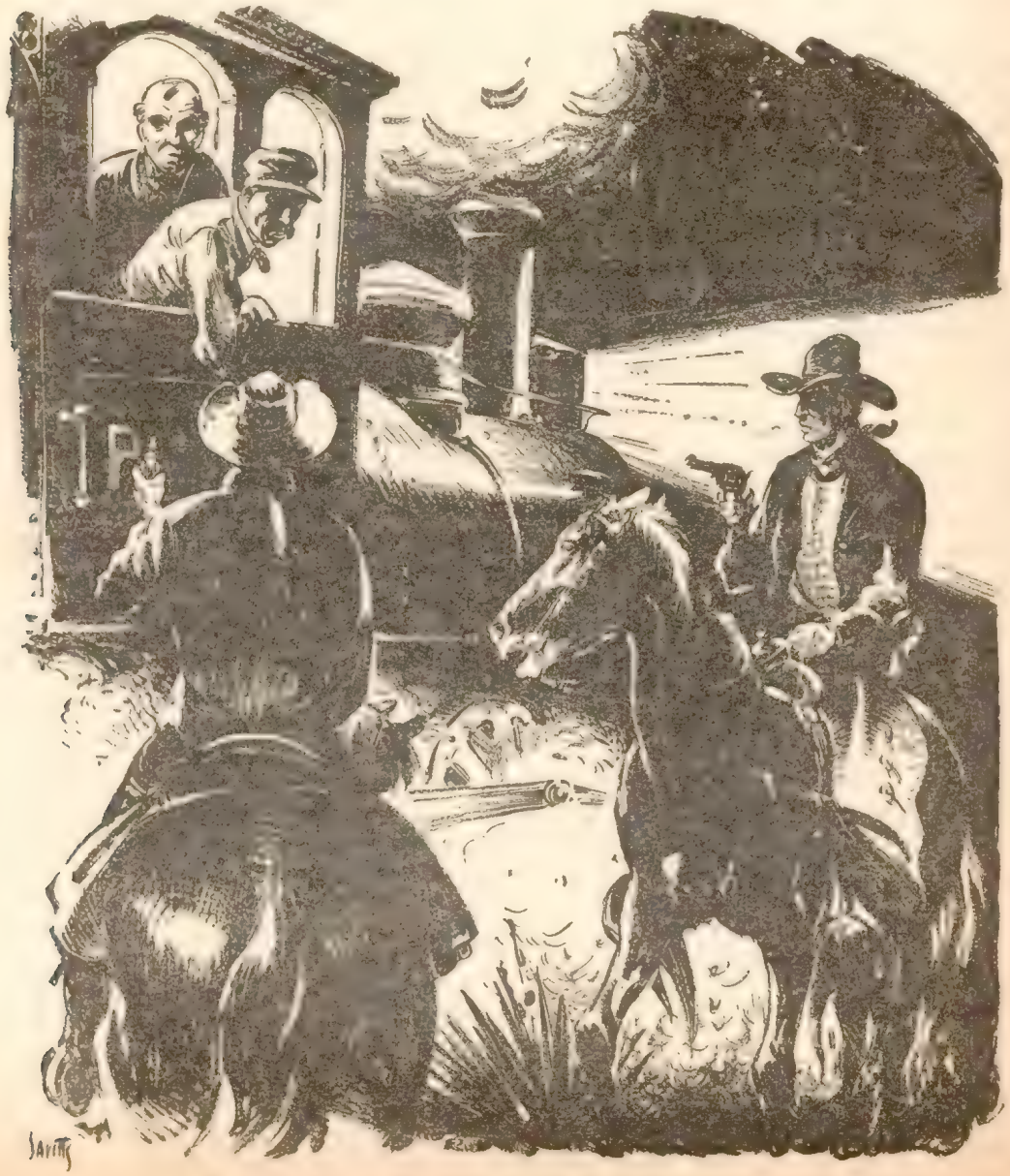
gone from Marley's eyes and he hummed softly as he reached for the telephone.

"Local, Seven Nine. And I want to speak to Howard Snodgrass. This is John Smith speaking. . . . Nobody but Snodgrass. That's the idea, dear. . . . That you, Howard? Okey. Listen. I'm having lunch with you at your house in fifteen minutes. . . . What? . . . No. I said in fifteen minutes. You'll be there, regardless, old man."

CHINOOK had company. A varied, motley company, that mid-afternoon when the Valley Bank closed its doors at noon. The cowtown teemed with a hundred rumors. The farm wagons of a nester gathering stood in the feed yard, the teams eating hay, the women sitting in anxious groups in the meager shade of the wagons. Their faces wore a harassed, wearied, beaten look. Their men were uptown in the crowd that still hung around the bank or gathered in the crowded barrooms. They had staked their all on a venture that now seemed doomed.

It was a foregone conclusion that the Valley Bank was broken. That the money they had put in there, together with the money borrowed from Creighton Marley, was lost.

With their crops in the ground, their



"It was after dark when the Nighthawk jumped the train. . . ."

pine-board shacks, battened with strips of boards, roofed with tar-paper, built there in this land into which they had come with their last dollar and their high hopes, they now stared, blank-eyed, bewildered, at stark disaster. A bank that held their money was about to fail. Instead of a bumper crop promised them by the spring rains, they were left, literally and proverbially, holding empty the grain sacks waiting to be filled with the golden grain.

Now a lone rider came down the street. Buck Rawlins, his square jaw covered with several days' stubble of beard, in shabby overalls and a shirt that needed changing. His hat was an old one, his boots were dusty, and he looked a little haggard. Buck had quit the spring round-up over on Larb Creek to make a hard ride for Chinook in answer to his father's message.

He had stopped only twice on that ride of over a hundred miles. Once he had stopped at the Rolling M ranch for a fresh horse and a bite to eat and to leave a message for Colleen, who was at the horse camp on Second Creek helping cut out some three-year-old geldings for breaking and sale. Buck's second stop was at Old Mary's road ranch. Again he changed horses, was fed by the genial Negress, and spent half an hour talking to The Nighthawk, who was hiding out there while a bullet hole in his side had healed.

Now, after a long night and morning spent in the saddle, Buck Rawlins rode into Chinook. Around his middle was a sagging cartridge belt and a .45 in its open holster. He carried his left arm a little stiffly.

From the opened hotel window the voice of his father hailed Buck. Buck pulled up, slouching sideways in his saddle, grinning crookedly.

"Step up a minute, son. I'll give yuh the lay uh things."

"They're sayin' Hank misused money belongin' to the bank. That he's made loans contrary to bank laws. The skunks are tryin' tuh send Hank Mayberry to the pen. They're houndin' a man that never stole a dollar in his life. Look at that mob down yonder. Hear the talk they're a-makin'. Yuh got here just about in time, Buck. How many of our boys are follerin' you?"

"The Block outfit is in town waiting delivery on some horses. They're just as good as our cowboys and they'll fight to the finish for Uncle Hank. Cutbank Carter and Tuley Bill should be in town later on this evenin'. We'll have men, if it comes to a show-down. But I don't think that it will come to that. Unless Uncle Hank is in too deep, we'll pay off the creditors a hundred cents on the dollar."

"We? Me'n Bob has done all we kin. We're not usin' a dollar uh the money Hank loaned us. But she goes deeper than that, son. Hank has to account fer at least fifty thousand dollars, so the li'l' West gal finds out somehow. There, by gosh, is a little woman with the grit of a real fighter. She's downtown somewheres now, keepin' an eye on things and listenin' to what she kin hear. Yeah, the Mazie young 'un says Hank is in the hole to the tune of fifty thousand er worse."

Buck rolled a cigaret. His lips, sun cracked and marred by the stubble of dust-filled whiskers, grinned. His eyes, bloodshot from weariness and loss of sleep, puckered at the corners.

"There'll be fifty thousand dollars cash in the bank on Monday morning, dad."

"The days of miracles," said Bob Driscoll gravely, "has passed, Buck."

"Hank Mayberry will have fifty thousand dollars cash Monday morning," repeated Buck softly. "We'll lick these scissor-bills. We'll make Marley and Snodgrass take a lickin' before we're done. We'll save Uncle Hank's bank."

"Nothin' foolish, son?"

"No, dad. Just helping an old friend that is in a tight. Nothing foolish. Now I'll go on down and try to crash the gate there at the bank."

XV

BUCK RAWLINS was humming under his breath as he rode boldly up the street to the modern and smart-looking bungalow where Howard Snodgrass lived. Dismounting, he swung with a quick step up the walk and up on the veranda. It was his first visit

to the home of Howard Snodgrass who had married Maud Mayberry.

Time had been, years ago, when Buck had carried Maud's books home from school and had taken her to parties. The past few years had separated them, divided their comradeship and their friendship. Maud had married Howard Snodgrass when she was going to an eastern college for girls. And while Buck had never really cared for her, he resented Maud's desertion of her old friends since she had come home the wife of the suave and polished and formal-mannered Howard Snodgrass.

A colored maid answered the door-bell. In reply to Buck's inquiry she told him that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Snodgrass were home.

"Sorry," grinned Buck, pushing his way past her and into the house, "but I think you're mistaken." Boldly, with a swinging, spur-jingling stride, he walked down the short hallway and, opening a door, stepped into a smoke-hazed room where sat Howard Snodgrass and Creighton Marley.

They gaped at him with a mingled fear and resentment. Marley's hand slid inside his coat pocket. Buck grinned crookedly at him.

"Better not, Marley. I'd hate to kill Howard's friend in here. But unless you let go of that gun I'll kill you where you sit. I've got a few words to say to you two crooks and I'll say 'em. Even if I have to talk after I've put a bullet in the belly of Creighton Marley."

Like a flash Buck's gun was in his hand, covering the two men. His boot slammed the door closed behind him. And as the hands of the two men raised, Buck smiled and nodded.

"Howard, take Marley's gun and lay it on the table. Then relax. Move, Howard, I'm not in a very tolerant humor. That's it. Now sit back, gentlemen, while a cowboy talks. Quite a joint you've got here, Howard. You'll miss it a lot when you move."

"What do you mean, move, you drunken fool?"

"When you go to the State's Penitentiary, Snodgrass. You and your friend Marley.

"Snodgrass," said Buck, "in a few minutes you are taking me to the bank. Before you go with me, tell me the right answer to a question. How much is Uncle Hank Mayberry's shortage? I want the truth or I'll bend this gun across your horns. Talk up."

The eyes of Howard Snodgrass shifted under Buck's blodshot, cold, gray stare.

"Fifty-three thousand dollars. He's due to go to the pen."

Buck reached for the 'phone. After a minute's waiting he heard Uncle Hank's voice at the other end of the wire.

"This is Buck Rawlins, Uncle Hank. Cowboys in town. My horse is outside and wrapped up in my slicker is about sixty thousand dollars. Have the side door of your bank open when I ride up. So-long."

Buck turned to the two men who were staring at him. He grinned and pulled on his battered hat.

"Never judge a man by the rags he wears. See you all later." And the silence in the room he shut the door upon was more, far more impressive than any words that could be said.

SIXTY thousand dollars in currency wrapped in a yellow slicker. Buck slid his horse to a halt at the deserted side door. He had untied the saddle-strings and was walking across the plank walk with the precious bundle when a man on horseback, dust-powdered, weary, his horse sweat streaked, pulled up and swung off his saddle, a gun in his hand.

"Drop it, Rawlins, and reach for some sky. You're my meat." The man pulled back his dusty coat, revealing a gold badge. His six-shooter covered Buck menacingly. Buck eyed him narrowly. An ugly, twisted grin was on the cowboy's mouth.

"You were at Old Mary's road ranch last night, weren't you?" said Buck contemptuously. "You were tending bar there for Mary. And you sneaked up to the closed door and listened to some talk. You know where this money comes from, do yuh? And you likewise know what it is to be used for. And you were in that posse that was going to take me for a buggy ride at the Rolling M fire. I knew you last night, you sneakin'

coyote. I knew you would try to follow me." Now Buck grinned and looked past the man.

"Thanks, Onion. If the rat tries to squeak, snuff him out."

The man with the badge whirled quickly. As he turned, Buck's six-shooter rapped against his skull and he went limp. Onion Oliver shoved his cedar-handled Colt back into its worn scabbard and bent over the unconscious man, ripping the gold badge from the man's shirt.

"I'll handle him, Buck. Git in there," he hissed.

"Good head, Onion. See yuh later." And Buck rapped on the locked door that was opened by Uncle Hank Mayberry. Now the door was closed and locked. Buck was inside the bank with the money.

Out on the sidewalk, Onion Oliver and a Block cowpuncher carried the unscious man down the street, half dragging, half carrying the limp bulk. The little scene had happened so quickly that not one of the crowd in the main street had noticed. They had not been watching the side door.

"He taken too much red-eye," Onion grinned at a curious constable. The constable nodded and let them pass along. Onion and the Block cowboy carried the limp man into a card room at The Bucket of Blood and locked the door.

"When Buck Rawlins sets his mind on somethin'," chuckled Onion, "he'll come doggone near carryin' 'er through. Lordy, he's quick. But he was shore in a tight spit fer a second. This weasel had 'im foul. Lucky we spotted this skunk and was waitin' fer just such a play. The question is, what'll we do with his carcass."

"He ain't dead, Onion."

"Nope. But he will be when he leaves this room. He's got the goods on Buck and I work fer Buck. He ain't sendin' Dave Rawlin's boy Buck to no pen. Not if I have tuh kill the cuss cold-blooded."

Onion turned the man's head and peered intently at it. A queer smile puckered the old cowhand's mouth. Then he set about searching the man's pockets. A wallet claimed Onion's attention and for some minutes he carefully read several cards and notes he found. Then he tossed the ornate badge over to the Block cowboy.

"You kin keep 'er for a souvenir. This jasper ain't any more of a railroad dick than I am. He's one uh Marley's job-lot, mail-order gun toters. Same cuss that was down in the bad-lands when they tried tuh kidnap the li'l' nester gal. I thought he looked familiar."

MEANWHILE, inside the bank, Buck faced Uncle Hank Mayberry, the bank examiner, and the other bank officials. Uncle Hank's face was gray and lined heavily with worry. He smiled wanly at Buck and his bulging slicker. Now Buck stepped to Hank's desk and spread open the slicker. There, in thick bundles secured with wide rubber bands, was the currency.

"Count it, gentlemen," said Buck. "I think you'll find it all there. Sixty thousand cash."

Ike Niland gave Buck a long, searching look, opened his grim lips as if to speak, then changed his mind. Uncle Hank sat on the corner of the desk, trying to roll a cigaret with shaking fingers. The eyes of the little old frontiersman were misty. His under lip quivered as he looked at Buck.

"I don't know how to try tuh say 'er, Buck, so I reckon I won't try."

Buck nodded and faced the bank examiner. "This money should be security for notes signed by my father and by Bob Driscoll and the other cowmen around here. Does this clear Uncle Hank Mayberry of the fool charges? Or are you going to try to railroad as fine a gentleman and as honorable a citizen as ever lived in Montana?"

"This is unexpected and irregular, of course," said the bank examiner whose task had, so far, been a most unpleasant one. "If there is cash here in the bank to cover the notes signed by the various stockmen to whom Mr. Mayberry has made loans, then those loans are most certainly covered. It is not an unusual thing for one bank to come to the assistance of another bank in such instances. There is nothing to prevent an individual from doing likewise. Your loyalty, my friend, is splendid."

"This is not my money. Uncle Hank,

will you just make out some sort of a statement for me? I'll dictate it, if you'd like and you write it." He grinned at the little old banker who gripped his fountain pen with stubby fingers.

"To Mary Green," dictated Buck slowly, "Friend Mary: Many thanks for the favor. Your friend, Hank Mayberry."

Uncle Hank wrote mechanically and blotted the fresh ink with the bronze handled blotter. He looked quizzically at Buck as he folded the note and handed it to the young cowman.

"Buck," he said, trying to keep his voice steady, "would it be speakin' outa turn if I asked who is Mary Green?"

Buck smiled a little and put the note in his wallet. "Mary Green," he told them, pride in his voice, "is a lady that we've always known as Old Mary."

Silence.

Ike Niland leaned forward, tensely.

"Old Mary?" gasped Uncle Hank. "Old Mary?"

"Yes, Old Mary. She's never had much use for banks and her life's savings that she's accumulated, she buried. When she heard that an old friend of hers was in trouble, she dug it all up and told me to give it to you."

For the first time since Buck had opened the slicker with its packages of money, Ike Niland seemed to relax. Buck grinned at him.

"So you thought I'd gone into the road-agent business, did yuh, Ike?"

"I wouldn't uh put it past yuh, son. Hank, step out an' tell that pack uh howlin' wolves that yore bank will open as always on Monday mornin' and them that chooses kin draw out. I'll tell 'em first and then you kin talk to 'em."

IKE NILAND, tall, rawboned, grim-lipped, opened the front door. Beside him stood Uncle Hank. Together they faced the mob that now went ominously silent.

"Folks," said Ike, his voice harsh and rasping, "you kin go on home. This bank ain't closin' its doors. It'll be open Monday and them as cares to, kin draw out what they got deposited. Most of you will be takin' this as shore good news. There are some other men in this crowd that will be sorry tuh know that Hank Mayberry's bank ain't failin'. I know just about everyone uh them same men and if they start anything, it will be to their sorrow." Ike's steely eyes roved over the crowd as if he were singling out the agitators. Then he laid his hand on the shoulder of his old friend. "Tell 'er to 'em, Hank."

"It's like the sheriff says, men. The bank will open Monday, the same as always. Them as is scared of losin' their few white chips kin draw 'em out."

"Yah!" snarled Eric Swanson. "Big talk that ain't costin' you a nickel. If you got money in that bank, pay off now. Pay us now!"

Others took up the cry. There was an ugly, surly, dangerous tone to their grumbled demand. "Pay us! Give us our money now! Pay off!"

Now Ike Niland again stepped out the front door. In his hands was a short-barreled automatic shotgun. Alone, gaunt, grim, menacing, he faced the mob that suddenly went silent again.

"The man that steps forward, gits killed. I'm the law here and I'll be the only law. You can't run this town and you'll mighty soon learn it. Right now I'm coverin' Eric Swanson and some uh the toughs hired to start a ruckus. You'll be the first ones tuh feel what's in this scatter-gun. When I told yuh this bank would open Monday I meant just that. There's money in there to pay off any man that wants to withdraw his account. Hank Mayberry will pay off Monday. Not until Monday. And I'm here to protect him and his bank. That goes just as she lays."

XVI

TROUBLE rode just under the skyline of the badlands ridges, skulking in the scrub pines and bushing up in the coulees. Hook Jones, killer, like a prowling wolf, his gun turned against every man now, his mind twisted and warped with that insane craving to kill, would never be taken alive.

Alone, shunning the men he had once ridden along many trails, nursing a fancied grudge against friend and foe alike, he was like a prowling wild beast. Hating sheep and sheepmen with a terrible bitterness, hating them because he blamed them

for an ill-luck that had befallen him, he had struck in the dead of night. Struck with an insane ferocity that was like the lash of a whip.

Firing a sheep wagon, he had shot the bewildered herder who had come stumbling, blinded by smoke, flame scorched, half-clothed and unarmed. He had sent shot after shot into the band of sheep that broke from the hillside bed-ground. With that same wanton killing lust of the wolf, he had slaughted the frightened sheep, scattering them into the hills to be pulled down by the four-footed wolves.

The camp tender, a downy-lipped boy from the highlands of Scotland, riding to investigate the fire and the shooting that had awakened him from his camp a mile away, had been shot through the arm by the snarling, cursing, red-eyed Hook Jones.

Hook Jones, his carbine poking the wounded boy in the ribs, had gritted his deadly challenge to the sheep outfit.

"Git on yore cayuse an' git fer home. Tell the lousy sheep owner that hires yuh that Hook Jones is wipin' 'im out. I fought yore kind in Wyoming and I'll fight yuh here. Git word to yore sheep folks that I'm here a-waitin'. Git word to that snivelin' son uh mine that I'll kill hime when he comes, the same as I'd kill a stinkin' sheep. Git word tuh Big Meat Drummond that I left him fer dead once an' I'll make a real job of 'er this time. Tell the nester tuh come along. Tell 'em all.

"Tell 'em I'm a cowboy and a killer. I'm a rattlesnake coiled tuh strike. I got whisky in the jug an' meat in my belly. I got ca'tridges enough tuh go around. Git on that sorry-lookin' pack horse yuh ride an' git to yore home ranch. Tell 'em all that ol' Hook Jones has opened up this war with a natural an' he'll never be took alive. Git, yuh sheep-stinkin' whelp. Outa my sight!"

AT a homestead on Big Warm, Guy Jones got stiffly into the saddle. He rode alone into the night, a carbine across his saddle, his white face stamped with a tragic, terrible look. He had been gone several hours when Buck Rawlins, riding a hard-pressed horse, pulled up. Guy's wife met Buck at the lighted doorway.

"He's gone," she told Buck in a lifeless voice. "Guy has gone to kill his father. May God have mercy on him." Her face was strained, white.

Buck, with the picture of that white-faced nester bride in his mind, rode on. He knew that somewhere under that same moon, the two Murdocks, father and son, were riding with carbines in their scabbards. He likewise knew that Big Meat Drummond and a picked crew of nesters and hired gunmen, rode for Marley. And that, within a few hours ride of the sheep camps, The Nighthawk and his men waited.

But Buck did not know that a girl on a big roan horse was at the camp of The Nighthawk now. Colleen Driscoll, at the horse camp where she had been working with her men, had caught news of the sheep killing. The news had been given her by a man whom she had never seen before. Under her level-eyed questioning the man admitted that he was one of The Nighthawk's riders.

"Take me to where The Nighthawk is camped," she told him. "This thing has to be stopped. Hook Jones has to be trapped and taken care of, or killed if need be. I'm going with you."

There was no persuading her otherwise. She rode with him across the hills at a hard pace, tight-lipped, courageous. Born and raised to this range life, trained to think and act quickly, schooled to steadiness of nerves, she was as capable as any man in an emergency and it was with a silent admiration for her grit that the outlaw guided her to the outlaw camp.

The Nighthawk greeted her without surprise. He listened to what she had to tell of Hook Jones. Then he gave a few quiet orders to his men to saddle their horses.

"The man said," Colleen told him, "that Hook Jones was riding Angus Murdock's big white horse."

The Nighthawk smiled thinly. "That don't mean that it was Hook that killed Joe Phelps and shot Buck in the shoulder. Hook musta found that white horse where the man that rode him before had put him in a little pasture in the breaks. I had a man posted down there watchin' that horse till the owner showed up. Nor it ain't the same horse that Angus Murdock rides. A dead ringer for Murdock's horse, but it wears a blotched brand on

the left thigh. I examined that blotched brand careful, I got it traced where that horse come from down near the Dakota border. When the owner of that horse showed up, my man had orders to take him alive."

"THAT means," said Colleen, "that Angus Murdock had nothing to do with the killing of Joe Phelps and setting fire to our range. That proves it?"

"Plumb, ma'am. Murdock, for all he runs sheep, ain't a sneak er bushwacker. And the day that Guy Jones got to pokin' around near where that horse was kept, and got shot in the laig, I patched up Guy's laig and told him to git word to Buck Rawlins that the Murdocks was innocent. The feller that plugged Guy was the man that killed pore Joe Phelps. I almost got him that day Guy was shot but he was too slick fer me. But it wasn't Hook Jones.

"There's a saddle hid where that white horse was kept. That saddle had mighty long stirrups. With the saddle was hid a black coat and a black hat the same as Murdock wears. The hat come from a store in Chinook where Murdock never trades. It's a store that has the nester trade. A store owned by Creighton Marley.

"Now, ma'am, you just stay here. I'll take the boys and scatter 'em out. One of us will locate Hook and pull his fangs. Hook, the pore devil, is plumb loco. I've talked to him twice. He snarled at me like a dog and run me outa his camp. He's plumb loco and I reckon whoever takes him will have tuh kill 'im."

"The man has always given me the creeps. His eyes were as cold and yellowish as the eyes of a wolf."

The Nighthawk nodded. "Hook has always bin a killer. I never run across any man that could hate like Hook hates. The only human on earth he cared for was that pore wife of his that lost her mind back in Wyoming when her family was wiped out and she fought like a man with a rifle. No job fer a woman.

"There's one woman in ten thousand, I reckon, that has any call to pull a gun trigger. She might have the nerve to kill a man and never weaken. It's afterward that she loses her nerve. She can't ever forget that she's taken the life of a human being. And it bothers her sleep and makes her old and miserable, and sometimes drives 'em loco like it did Hook's missus. She's better off in her grave, because everything in life that a woman cares about is bloodstained by that one pull of a gun trigger. Ma'am, do you pack a gun?"

"Of course I do. I have a .22 high-power carbine and a .38 pistol."

The Nighthawk nodded, a soft smile on his handsome face. "Would yuh mind givin' me them guns?"

Colleen knew his object in telling her about Hook's wife. He was forestalling another such tragedy in the life of a woman. She knew that he was right, too. With a quick smile she handed him the pearl-handled .38 she always carried, then slipped the carbine from its saddle boot and passed it over.

"NOW, ma'am," The Nighthawk said, "I'll send one uh my men along with yuh. You kin do a heap uh good, mebbyso, before many hours, but that good can't be done here in the badlands where bullets are kickin' up dust. Hit the trail for either the 7UP or the Rolling M ranch. Git some bandages ready and some hot water on the stove. If this thing comes to a head, somebody is goin' to need patchin' up. You kin do a lot of good by goin' home."

"I'll go," she told him. "But before I pull out for home, I'm going to the sheep camps. I want to say something to Bill Murdock."

For a long moment The Nighthawk looked at her, his eyes searching hers. Then he nodded briefly.

"The two Murdocks and about ten riders went into camp not five miles from here. I'll go with yuh and see that yo're safe."

Colleen nodded. She had seen that swift glint of suspicion in the outlaw's eyes. Even if she was the daughter of Bob Driscoll and an enemy of the sheepmen, he was not trusting her to go alone to the sheep camp. Without a word they rode, side by side, up the trail. Behind them rode The Nighthawk's men, a grim cavalcade, silent, heavily armed, ready to grin at death.

At the head of the breaks, The Nighthawk scattered them. To each man he gave brief, uncompromising instructions.

"Git Hook. Take him alive if yuh kin. But if he begins throwin' lead, kill 'im."

"You think Hook will ever be taken alive?" asked Colleen.

"No, ma'am. Not a chance on earth to take him alive."

"Didn't you and Hook used to ride together?" she asked. "Weren't you good friends?"

The outlaw leader gave her a brief look. "I am still Hook's friend," he said quietly. "I hope it is someone besides me that has to kill him. But a quick bullet always beats a hangin'."

"KIN you sing, ma'am?" asked The Nighthawk, pulling up.

"Not according to the music teachers, but the cattle I've sung to at night never seemed to mind. Why?"

"Better commence singin' because we're gittin' mighty near the sheep camp. And while there's a moon, still they might not take much stock in this white rag I'm hangin' on my gun barrel. Nobody I ever heard of, not even sheep folks, ever killed a lady while she was singin'. Better tune up."

"I can't think of a song to save my neck. . . . Yes. Yes I can, and if there's any merit in my singing this song may help."

In a soft, clear voice that carried sweetly across the moonlit hills, Colleen Driscoll sang. The song she sang was Annie Laurie.

The Nighthawk, riding alongside her, his white flag held high, listened to the song of the range-bred girl. A tightness came into his throat. He had never heard a voice like that singing under the stars. He had never felt that pinching of his heart until tonight.

The click of steel-shod hoofs. The faint jingling of their spurs. The star-filled night and the smell of pines and sage. And a girl's voice, clear noted as the liquid song of a bird singing, that song that has never grown less sweet in the hearts of men who wander. Annie Laurie.

Now, bulking huge against that moonlit sky, the figure of Angus Murdock, a rifle gripped in his hands. In silence the sheepman let them come on. And now the song was done and the hush that followed throbbed with the sweetness of its memory.

"'Twas a bonny song, lass," he greeted them. "Wi' memories o' a far fairer land than a' this i' the words. But 'tis no time for the song o' Annie Laurie, nor is it the place. Ye'll name your errand?"

"I've come to plead with you, Mr. Murdock, not to carry this terrible business any further. Two wrongs can never make a right."

"Perhaps not." And the old sheepman's voice burred harshly. "But dinna think for any minute that Angus Murdock sits at home and lets his men be murdered and his property destroyed. 'Tis too late for such talk. We're here to fight, aye, and fight we will. Take your song and your flag o' truce elsewhere, for the Murdocks will ha' none o' it. Get ye gone."

"Can I talk to Bill Murdock?" she asked.

"Ye canna'. Wull is nowhere aboot here. And if he was here, 'twould gain ye naught. The lad's a Murdock. No song can soften him when he recalls the blood as has been spilled here. Get ye gone, lass, and take yon white flag and the mon that haulds it from my sight."

"JUST a minute, Murdock," spoke The Nighthawk, "then we'll go. One man done all the damage to yore sheep and yore men. Give us till tomorrow at sundown to git this man. There's no sense in throwin' this country into a range war. The man that did the harm will pay for it. He'll be dead by tomorrow night."

"Who are ye, mon, to make such a promise?"

"I used to be Wade Hardin. Now I'm called The Nighthawk."

"An' ye'd ha' honest men take the word o' a thief and a killer?"

"I never robbed anything but the railroads, Murdock, and what I take from them ain't half enough to pay for what they've done to me and mine. And I never killed any man that wasn't tryin' to kill me."

"Hook Jones is one o' ye!" growled Murdock.

"No. Yo're wrong. It has bin a long time since Hook rode with me. I've never hurt you or yore sheep. Two winters ago, when a herder uh yours was caught in a blizzard with his sheep we found him half dead, we nursed him and we herded yore sheep. The snow was crusted and they had to be fed. For ten days those woolies lived on 7UP hay. Another time, during a dry summer, Dave Rawlins let your sheep water at his reservoir, and never charged you a cent. You've done the same kind of favors for him because, even if you didn't lose no love for each other, you was both white men. Murdock, if you take up this thing and start war against the 7UP, yo're all wrong, believe me."

"Prove what ye claim, mon. Prove it."

"Give me till sundown tomorrow and I'll prove it."

"Till sundown tomorrow, then. Get ye gone. And whate'er else ye do, take care o' the lass. For a' that she does na' care for sheep, she has a bonnie voice. Good nicht, lassie. God take care o' ye."

So they left Angus Murdock, standing bulked against the moonlit sky, his rifle in his hands, a huge giant of a man, stern and brave and immovable.

When they had gone some distance one of The Nighthawk's men emerged from the darkness and met them.

"I'll have to leave yuh here, ma'am. There's a heap to do. This gent will ride home with yuh."

Colleen held out her hand. "You're doing a lot for all of us," she told him gravely. "I wish there was something we could all do to pay back all we owe you."

"Once a man makes his sign along the outlaw trail there is nothin' that anybody kin ever do except bury him where the coyotes can't dig up his bones. It has bin a honor to meet up with the daughter of Bob Driscoll. He give me my first job and he was like a daddy to me when I was a button of a kid. That was before you was born. If ever I kin do Bob or you a good turn, it's only payin' back, just a little bit, all that he has done for me. So-long."

Before Colleen could say anything more, The Nighthawk had turned his horse and was gone in the shadows of the scrub pines and buck brush.

COLLEEN and the quiet-mannered man who was her escort rode on toward home. With her she carried the picture of the outlaw's handsome, tragic face, and the hard eyes that she had seen soften. She wondered what could be that bitter secret that had turned him onto the outlaw trail. What wrong, real or fancied, had changed the life of Wade Hardin? No man had ever shared his bitter secret. Perhaps no man would ever know, even after The Nighthawk's bones lay buried in some lonely grave.

While along his trail that led him into the heart of the badlands. The Nighthawk kept remembering the song he had heard tonight. The song that had almost melted the bitter, aching lump in his heart. But, strangely enough, the song blended with the vision of another girl. The girl whom he had left back in Chicago that day when his happiness had turned to terrible grief. The day that he had quit the society of honest men and had turned outlaw. The day that Wade Hardin, world's champion rodeo man, had become The Nighthawk.

He wondered what had brought Mazie West out here to Montana. Had she hoped to find the man who had so abruptly left her? Did she still care a little? No, he reckoned not. Anyhow, he'd never know. He'd never see her again. Once he had finished this job here, he would ride on, on southward, never to return. . . . That Annie Laurie song . . . Mazie West with her hair of spun gold and honest, wistful eyes . . . It was time he was riding on to cross new skylines, drifting, dodging, fighting. His heart empty of hope, an outlaw until he filled an outlaw's grave.

"Lift 'em high, Wade!"

The Nighthawk pulled up abruptly. That was not Hook's voice. That was not Hook's way.

There was a small derringer fastened in the sleeve of The Nighthawk's coat. It was there for a purpose. A hole card that no man's gun had ever yet uncovered. With a slight flip of his wrist, that tiny, deadly little weapon could pump its two .44 slugs into a man's heart within a split second. Smiling grimly, The Nighthawk lifted his hands.

With a six-shooter cocked in his hand,

the tall figure of Ike Niland stepped from a brush patch.

"LONG time no see yuh, Ike." The Nighthawk's voice was drawling.

"And the same tuh you, Wade Hardin, with many happy returns uh the day. Use yore left hand to unbuckle yore gun belt. I'd shore hate tuh shoot a man I'd once rode with."

"That goes double, Ike. Sorry I can't say I'm glad tuh meet an old pardner, but you know how it is. Well, I'm glad it's you that will pull down the bounty on me."

"Nobody said a word about bounty, Wade. I'm no scalp hunter. Now unbuckle the belt."

The Nighthawk grinned crookedly and shook his head. "Ike, me and you need to have a medicine talk. I got a job to do tonight. It's a job that holds no pleasure for me, but it's one uh those things that has got to be done. I'll need my gun to do it."

Ike Niland's eyes hardened. "I said I'd hate to kill a man I'd once rode with. But I will kill yuh if you don't do like I say. You've done enough jobs down here."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' this Murdock sheep business.

Hook's terrible eye lifted. "Come outa there, young 'un."

Yuh'll hang fer killin' that herder."

"Yuh mean yo're layin' that on me, Ike?"

"I'm layin' nothin'. That's fer the jury tuh prove, not me. Unbuckle that belt?"

Slowly, with his left hand, The Nighthawk obeyed that command that had sounded like the crack of a pistol shot. Belt and gun slid to the ground with a dull thud.

"Now step down without lowerin' them hands. I'm takin' no chances. One bad move and I'll shoot."

"I know yuh will, yuh long-geared old sucker." The Nighthawk, grinning, swung gracefully to the ground. Ike stepped up behind him, searching him for extra guns. He gave a little clicking sound with his tongue when he took Colleen's pearl-handled gun from the outlaw's pocket.

"Where'd yuh git this, Wade?"

"From a young lady that kin shore sing Annie Laurie. She gave it to me as a sort of souvenir."

"Sounds almighty fishy. Now turn around so as I kin look inside yore shirt fer any . . . Look out!"

WITH a lightning-like move, The Nighthawk had dropped his arms around Ike's middle, had given a terrific twist and jerk, throwing the older man off his feet and onto the ground. Hardly more than a minute later The Nighthawk was on his feet with the agility of a cat. He held Ike's gun and the pearl-handled pistol.

"Now, yuh darned o' turkey gobbler," he told the bewildered and gasping sheriff, "we hold that pow-wow.

"First, I want you to git this much into yore skull. I had nothin' to do with that sheep business. Hook Jones has gone loco and he's yore huckleberry. He's started a one-man war on the sheep folks and he'll play his string out till he's cut down. Cuttin' ol' Hook down is the job I have in mind. Now, darn yore homely picture, will you listen or won't yuh?"

For several long seconds the two men looked hard into one another's eyes. Then Ike Niland nodded.

"I never knowed you tuh lie, Wade. I'm beginnin' tuh savvy. Hook always claimed you was the only man that ever came anywhere near bein' his friend. He's gone loco, now. Killin' mad. I bin afraid he'd do that. A strait-jacket and padded cell in the State Asylum would be a heap worse than bein' shot through the heart. I think I savvy, Wade Hardin."

"Ike," said The Nighthawk, "did you ever hear tell of a gun slinger called Big Meat Drummond?"

"The feller Hook killed down in Wyoming?"

"That's the gent, but he wasn't killed. He's here in this country. He's the ramrod that Creighton Marley hired to handle his tough gents. It was either Big Meat Drummond or a Swede nester named Eric Swanson that killed Joe Phelps. It was either one or the other of 'em that wore a black hat and coat and rode a white horse the night that the Rolling M range was set afire. Somehow, I think that Big Meat is the gent that passed hisself off as Angus Murdock, but I'm almost positive, on the other hand, that Big Meat wa'n't within fifty miles uh that fire.

"It's had me guessin' some. But I know this for shore. Creighton Marley hires 'em both. And Howard Snodgrass, Hank Mayberry's dude son-in-law, is in on the deal. They both own stock in an outfit called The Northwest Land and Finance Company. They're the outfit that sent out all kinds uh pamphlets and such, all over the East, telling how crops kin be raised here on the ridges and pinnacles. They'e the dirty outfit that's fooled these pore farmer devils into comin' out here to dry farm the country.

"They loan the farmers a little money. Enough to tie up the homestead. The farmer puts a crop in and fences the place. The Company keeps him from starvin' to death till he's proved up on the homestead. Then they cut him off at the pockets and call in the paper. The farmer can't pay and all he kin do is let his homestead go to this Northwest Land and Finance Company. The same company that's freezin' out the cattlemen. Later, when the cowman has gone and the farmer has gone, the company will get water on a lot uh the land, put it in grain and alfalfa, and farm it at a big profit. The whole thing is a big steal, Ike, and the law has tuh give 'em protection while they're a-doin' it."

"You say this Big Meat Drummond works fer Marley?"

"Didn't you know that Marley had a gang uh tough hombres ridin' the hills? They tortured Old Mary, tryin' to make her tell where I was. Said they was a posse. They taken Mazie West, a little homesteader girl, and Onion Oliver prisoner. Lord knows what woulda happened if I hadn't taken a hand in the game. I busted up the gang and aimed tuh make a good Injun outa Big Meat, but he got away.

"I was goin' to send Big Meat Drummond to yuh for a sort uh Christmas present. He's worth five thousand bucks on the hoof or laid on the block, down in Wyoming. His gun is for hire on any kind of a job. He's bad medicine. And while he high-tailed it fer parts unknown, he's most liable to be showin' his hand again. If him and Hook ever cross trails, they'll burn powder a-plenty, if Big Meat happens tuh be drunk enough tuh stand his hand. Sober, the big son is yellow plumb through, but he's no man tuh monkey with when he's got his hide soaked with fightin' likker.

"And when Marley learns about the war bein' on between the Murdocks an' the Rawlins outfit, he's bound to send Big Meat and his toughs into the ruckus. They'll be drunk and some of 'em smokin' marijuana, and they'll be plenty tough. If you've got a posse down here, gather 'em up and head for the sheep camps at the head uh the breaks. Try to head off Buck Rawlins, if yuh can. Buck is a hot-headed young colt and apt tuh git into trouble. Me and the Driscoll lady tried tuh talk peace to Angus Murdock and we got him thinkin'. I told him I'd take care uh Hook Jones. Then I sent Colleen Driscoll home."

"Yuh let her go alone, Wade?"

"With these renegades of Marley's coyotin' all over the hills? I reckon not. Whitey Rance is with her. As long as Whitey kin lift a gun, she's as safe as she'd be in a church pew. I taken her guns because a woman has no business handlin' a gun. I was thinkin' of Hook's missus when I taken this pearl-handled gun and a carbine off her."

THERE was a long moment of silence. Then Ike Niland spoke. "Wade Hardin, you got a heap uh good, solid hoss sense. Yo're purty much of a white man. Yo're still young enough tuh go to a new country and make a new start. Mexico or South America will be about the climate to fit yore clothes. Pull outa here and hunt a new range."

"Too late for that, Ike. The railroad outfits would hunt me down, and do me like they did my dad and brother. They'd put their hounds on my trail and some day I'd be shot down like a coyote, or trapped and shut up fer life, er hung."

"They got yore dad and brother?" This was the first time that any man had ever heard Wade Hardin speak of a father or brother.

"Out in California, yeah. They'd never done any man harm. They had a ranch there. The railroad wanted a right-of-way through it. But they wouldn't pay anywhere near the price. There was a lawsuit on about it, and the railroad had plenty money and tophand lawyers to win the case. But dad wa'n't the kind to lay down and take a lickin'. He fought 'em through the courts.

"He was still fightin' 'em in court when, one night, two men stopped overnight at his place. Dad asked 'em no questions and took no money for their lodgin'. But the dirty whelps left money, anyhow. Because the next day, when two railroad dicks drove up, they accused dad and my brother of bein' mixed up in a train holdup that had happened some weeks before. They searched the house and the barn. And up in the hayloft these dicks uncovered a gunny-sack with three-four thousand dollars in it. The serial numbers on them banknotes corresponded to some uh the stolen money.

"They arrested dad and my brother and starts for town. The team boogered and run away, spillin' the dicks, dad and my brother out. And when the dust had cleared away, the dicks was handcuffed together and their guns belonged to the two men they'd tried to railroad to the pen. . . . A week later the railroad posse surrounds dad's camp where him and my brother was hidin'. And the dirty hide hunters shot 'em down then and there. First I knowed of it was a big account in a Chicago newspaper, showin' their pictures and braggin' up the possemen that murdered 'em. And from that day on, I've

done my best to even up the debt. There's the yarn, Ike. Yo're the first man that ever heard me tell it."

"It's time we was movin', Wade. But before we separate, I'll give you somethin' to think about. There ain't any picture of you, anywhere, except some snapshots taken when you was ridin' broncs and ropin', and even if they was clear, they'd never do a dick any good because you've changed a lot. Yore hair is gittin' white and yo're heavier. With a mustache and city clothes, nobody would ever know yuh. There's no fingerprint records. No dick in the country ever saw yuh close. If you was to board a train in Dakota, say, with a ticket fer New York, or was to go as far as Chicago on a cattle train, there'd be no man to lay a hand on yuh." Ike Niland looked steadily into the outlaw's eyes.

"Especially, Wade, if it got proved that The Nighthawk was killed down here in the bad-lands. Yo're doin' this cow country a big favor right now. Them as are yore friends ain't forgettin'. Think that over while yo're on yore way to find Hook Jones. So-long."

Ike led his horse from the brush and mounted. Solemnly the two men, sheriff and outlaw, shook hands. The bitterness was gone from The Nighthawk's face and his eyes were bright with a strange light.

"So-long, Ike. I'll think 'er over. And even if the sign don't come right for me tuh quit the country, I'll be rememberin'. You've give me better than I deserve, ol' pardner."

When Ike Niland had gone on up the trail, The Nighthawk mounted and rode on. His gun was in his hand now, and his eyes were searching the blotches of shadow on the trail ahead. He was almost certain that he would find Hook Jones at the hidden pasture a few miles beyond. Somewhere an old owl boomed weirdly. Beyond, death sulked in the shadow of the scrub pines.

BUCK RAWLINS had followed the tracks made by Guy Jones' horse until the sign was lost with the coming of darkness. Now he must take a blind chance and hope against hope that he was thinking as Guy was thinking, that Hook would be found just in south of the sheep camps, there in the rough breaks between Antelope Springs and the Missouri River. . . .

What chance had Guy against his father? Guy, whose hand was better fitted to a Bible than a gun.

It would be murder when Hook Jones opened fire. For Guy would ride without taking care to keep in the shadows. He would be skylighted, a target too easy for Hook to ever miss. Buck had one chance in a hundred, perhaps one chance in a thousand of heading off the boy on his way to death.

Buck saw the light of a sheep wagon. The wagon would be empty, of course. Just a lantern burning inside the canvas top. And hidden in the brush around it would be Murdock's men, ready to open fire on the first rider that showed up.

Yet, so Buck Rawlins figured, his only chance of again locating Guy Jones was to find someone who had sighted the boy before dark. It was a desperate chance, riding up on that lighted wagon. A hundred to one chance that some half-scared, quick-triggered fool would open up on him with a Winchester.

Buck slipped from his saddle. Cautiously, lest it be some clever trap, he crept forward. Now he could make out a man, lying in a cramped position, at the edge of a patch of sagebrush. Keeping the man covered, Buck crawled on all fours up to where the man lay, hands and feet tied behind his back and drawn together so as to bend the man's spine backward in a painful arc. A bandanna handkerchief was tied tightly across his open mouth, so tight as to cut the flesh. Buck's jackknife freed the man.

"Who are you?" whispered Buck. "Talk low."

For a moment the man, whose face was covered with a heavy beard that almost reached his eyes, did not speak. He moaned through his bleeding lips, his eyes seared with pain. Now Buck saw that the fellow was bleeding from several ugly looking wounds. His shirt was in shreds and his blond beard matted with blood.

"I work for Murdock, tending camp. Bill Murdock put me here on guard. I guess I went to sleep for a minute. When I woke up that man was on top of me, tearing me to pieces with a sharp hook he

had in his hand. Then he knocked me out. I wake up once more tied like this. My back feels broke. I'm sick."

"Come at you with a hook, did he?" Buck's eyes narrowed. That meant Hook Jones was near here. The man could not have lain there long. Even now the murderous Hook Jones might be crouched in the brush, ready to leap on Buck's back. Buck turned his head quickly, then grinned crookedly at his fears.

"Can you ride?"

"I think so."

"Then get up on my horse. I'll follow on foot. We can bandage you up at the wagon." Buck lifted the man into the saddle.

"Have you any signal that will pass us to the wagon without getting shot at?"

"Whistle three times. Like this." The wounded man whistled. From the direction of the wagon came an answering signal. They went on.

Under the menacing cover of several rifles held by men who crouched in the brush, they gained the wagon.

"Whoever's in charge here," said Buck impatiently, "step out and lend me a hand with this man." And as Buck lifted the injured man down, he felt the torn body go limp in his arms. Buck laid the man out on the ground and looked up at a man who had come forward. The man had a six-shooter in his hand, pointed at Buck. Buck's eyes narrowed as he recognized the big tough he had fought at Mazie West's homestead. He had not yet learned the big fellow's identity.

THERE was an ugly, drunken leer on Big Meat Drummond's coarse mouth. "You got a gall, Rawlins. Knifin' one of our men and fetchin' him in. Yuh shore got a gall."

"So that's your attitude, is it? Where's Bill Murdock or whoever is roddin' this spread?"

"I'm the big bull in this herd, Rawlins. What yuh got to say?"

"You? Murdock hired you?"

"Yeah. And he never made no mistake when he did it, neither. I'll show you gents how we treated yore kind down in Wyoming. I'll dish yuh up a mess uh lead that'll make yuh sick."

"Never mind that," said Buck, rising from where he knelt beside the wounded man. "I'll listen to your bragging when I have a lot of spare time on my hands. Take care of this man before he dies."

"Now ain't you the tender-hearted thing," sneered Big Meat. "You cut him all up, then tell me to take care of him. You shore got a gall. Yeah." Big Meat thumbed back the hammer of his single-action .45. He leaned forward from the hips, on widespread legs, his eyes glittering redly in the light that came from the wagon. With a sudden shock, Buck realized that the man was going to murder him.

"Rawlins," he gritted, his lips snarling apart from clenched teeth, "go after yore gun. I'm goin' to kill yuh!"

Buck's gun was in its holster. Before he could ever get it free, Big Meat's finger would press the trigger. At five-foot range the heavy .45 slug would tear through Buck's heart. This was to be murder.

Every muscle, every nerve in Buck's body was taut. His narrowed eyes held the slitted, bloodshot glare of the big killer. Then came the triumphant crash of a gun.

Buck leaped, his hand dragging out his gun. He wondered, in a split-second's thought, where the bullet had struck him. He felt no pain. What was the matter with the big brute?

Big Meat had spun halfway around, a horrible look of terror on his face. He was sagging at the knees a little. His eyes, wide with fright, stared at the right hand that had held his gun. The hand, limp, empty of weapon, was covered with gushing blood. It hung from a wrist that was a bloody mangled thing of broken bone and bleeding flesh.

Through the echoes of that gun roar there sounded a laugh, crazy, triumphant. Even as Big Meat Drummond dropped to his knees, moaning and whimpering, holding his maimed wrist. On his knees, swaying to and fro, his staring eyes fixing a horrified gaze on Buck's face.

"Rawlins, don't! Don't kill me! Yuh got me, now! Yuh shot me enough! Don't kill me!"

Big Meat, the bully, was now a groveling, begging wretch. He thought that it was Buck whose bullet had smashed his

wrist. Buck, standing there dazed, his gun in his hand.

XVIII

AND now Buck Rawlins saw that which seemed to him like some unreal apparition Just at the rim of light thrown off by the lantern in the canvas topped sheep wagon, there rode a black-coated, black-hatted figure on a big white horse. Then, as mysteriously as it had shown, it was gone in the night. Without sound, it vanished.

Buck pulled his shattered nerves together. There was the bleeding camp-tender at his feet. Just beyond, the kneeling, whining killer with the smashed wrist. Beyond him, several men who stood like dumb statues, their hands raised. It was like some strange, nightmarish dream.

"Pull your hands down out of the sky," he said to the men who seemed terrified, "and take care of this camp-tender first. Then look after the big tough boy that was so hard. Come on, men, don't stand there like posts. Lend a hand."

They came now, frightened and timid of manner. They were the sheepherders and farmers hired by the Murdocks to defend the camps. His own shock of being jerked from the pit of death now took a reaction. He wanted to laugh or crack a joke or something. But he gathered the frayed ends of his nerves and grinned.

"I'm not shooting anybody, boys. Just take care of these two men."

Now a man rode up out of the night. Buck's gun was back in his hand. Then, with a grin, he shoved it back in its scabbard.

"Howdy, sheepherder," he hailed Bill Murdock. But there was no answering grin on Bill Murdock's face.

"What's going on here, anyhow?"

"He tried tuh kill me," moaned Big Meat. "He's already killed that camp-tender."

"Shut up," snapped Buck. "I shot nobody, Bill. For gosh sake, get off and help me dress this poor devil's hurts. Never mind the hard looks."

Bill Murdock stepped down off his horse. He still had his gun in his hand, but Buck payed the weapon no attention.

"Take his feet, Bill. We'll put him in the wagon."

Together they carried the wounded man into the lighted wagon. Buck's knife ripped away what was left of the ragged shirt.

"Get a basin of water, Bill, and anything that'll do for an antiseptic. I bet there ain't a clean cloth around."

Bill Murdock grinned.

"It happens that there is. Clean dish-towels washed today. This ain't a dirty cow camp where . . ."

"We'll do without the oration, sheep-herder. Tell your big plug-ugly outside that if he'll come in in a few minutes, we'll amputate that hand for him. You shore picked a game guy when you hired that skunk."

"Gawd, yu hain't gonna cut a man's hand off, are yuh?" whimpered Big Meat. "Yuh can't do that, Rawlins. Just tie 'er up tight so's I won't bleed tuh death."

"I was just foolin', big 'un. Come in." He hauled the wobbly-kneed killer into the wagon. Bill Murdock came in. They put Big Meat on the other bunk and examined the maimed wrist. The big man howled with pain. Bill and Buck traded glances. The bullet had torn away the wrist joint so that the hand hung by a piece of ragged flesh. No chance of saving the man's hand. Buck's joshing had turned into grisly reality.

Big Meat Drummond lay back on the bunk, moaning and sobbing, begging them to do something to ease his pain.

"Whisky!" he begged them. "Gimme whisky. There's a jug under the wagon."

Bill brought it. There was a grim look in the young sheepman's eyes when he looked from the wounded man to Buck. "Marley brought it." He handed the jug to Buck who filled a tin cup brimming full. Big Meat sat up, his one good hand gripping the cup. He drained it in three big gulps. Buck again filled the cup. And a third time it was filled and emptied. Big Meat's eyes looked glassy now. But it would be perhaps an hour before he passed out.

BUCK went outside. From his saddle pockets he took a compact surgical kit of black leather.

"While I didn't stay long enough in

medical school to dirty many shirts," he said to Bill, "still I got the rudiments of the racket. We lack about nine-tenths of the sanitary stuff they preach about, but if this baby is half as tough as he looked when he was about to shoot me in the belly, he'll get over this here leetle scratch. What's a hand or a little gangrene to a hard-boiled he-gun toter? Hands clean, Bill? Shove 'em in water hot as they'll stand. Here's some whisky to wash 'em in. Shame to waste good likker like this."

Buck hovered over an open stewpan filled with boiling water. Into it he dipped shining steel instruments. He worked swiftly, deftly.

"I know doctors, Bill, that'd die of horror if they saw this job. All right, now. That tourniquet is holding pretty. Tie the arteries with thread like this, see. First aid. If he gets to a doctor by tomorrow he'll be all right. Now we apply the . . . Steady, sheepherder."

For Bill was swaying a little, faint at the sight of this crude surgery. Buck nodded toward the jug and finished bandaging the wrist.

Bill took a stiff drink and handed one to Buck. Buck shook his head and grinned as he washed his arms and hands in the basin of hot water.

A droning, whining, snarling crash. A bullet smashed the basin under Buck's hands.

Buck snorted. "Time we put the light out," grinned the young cowman thinly, and blew out the lantern flame.

TULEY BILL BAKER looked from the face of Cutbank Carter to the face of Onion Oliver. Sadness and annoyance mingled in the eyes of Tuley Bill as he got down off his horse.

Sunrise found the three near the sheep camps. Tuley Bill sniffed the air and made a wry face. "Smell 'em, cowhands? Smell the blattin' woolies?"

"A man would think," said Onion, "that you owned the only nose north of the Pecos. I bin smellin' 'em the last ten miles. Let one sheep cross the range and I kin smell the thing fer forty miles. She looks plumb peaceful hereabouts. Hope they ain't killed off all uh them skunks we come tuh find. Hello. Yonder comes a hossbacker. Who's it, Cutbank?"

"Looks tuh me like ol' Ike Niland. Yuh don't reckon he's after us fer anything, do yuh?"

"Hard tuh say, warthawg," grunted Tuley Bill. "Yuh done enough orneriness tuh have a oneasy conscience, I reckon. Me, I'd shore hate tuh pack around a load uh guilt like you got yorese'f weighted down with."

"I bet you stole that bottle yuh keep nursin'," growled Onion. "We better destroy the evidence. Ike's a-ridin' like he was goin' to camp fer dinner with a empty stummick."

A few minutes later Ike Niland met them. His face was lined with weariness and worry.

"Glad yuh got here," he said abruptly. "Things is almighty tight over yonder. Where is Buck Rawlins?"

"We ain't met him, Ike."

"He left the sheep camps durin' the night. Bill Murdock won't say where Buck went. The rimrocks and brush patches is full uh men r'arin' tuh burn powder. Hook Jones is still loose. Hook was chargin' around all night on a big white geldin', shootin' an' ridin' away before anybody could line sights on 'im.

"Angus Murdock an' Marley an' that Eric Swanson nester has a bunch uh gunfighters hid in the rocks and won't listen tuh reason. Ol' Angus won't listen tuh anybody, not even to his own son's talk. Says he's goin' to stay where he is until sundown, then he's gonna commence to begin or words to that effect. He cussed Bill Murdock out and he cussed me out and he's shore on the prod. Take a man like Angus Murdock, he's slow tuh git mad, but once he does git on the warpath, he is worse than Settin' Bull. And he's sober, to boot. It ain't ary wild whisky talk with Angus Murdock. He's solemn as a preacher an' even his cussin' is solemn. He used words I never heard till this mornin' and I takes Bill Murdock along as interpreter.

"Then Marley comes out with his polite fight talk. Tells me how this will be my last term in office if I don't stand behind the law an' order an' the protection uh property belongin' to citizens. He orates a-plenty about the rights and the legalities

uh the sheepmen an' the farmer. He musta had 'er wrote down on paper, the way he went on. Eric Swanson an' this Deacon Nelson is likewise there with Angus Murdock an' Marley. This Deacon nester is a-tryin' to make peace, but he ain't a-gittin' very far. And when I horn in with a word er two, the whole pack of 'em light into me, tellin' me that I'm duty bound to protect 'em against the cow folks.

"Bill Murdock is the only one that seems tuh have any sense. Bill has some judgment, and he's nervy in a tight, even if he is a sheepman. He's playin' a game uh some kind, sort uh lone-handed, and he ain't toppin' his hole card for any man tuh see. He's got me puzzled. This is shore a mess, boys. I need old heads like you three to help me out. How's things in town?"

"Everything is purty and the goose hangs high," grinned Onion. "We got yore jail full and key throwed away. That hoosegow never had such distinguished boarders before."

"WHAT have you three ol' bone-heads bin up to, anyhow? If you bin playin' any of yore old-time monkey-shines with my jail, I'll show yuh some lessons yuh never knowed was in the book. What yuh bin up to?"

"Tuck in yore shirt tail, Ike," purred Onion, displaying the gold badge that had been worn by the man who had tried to halt Buck Rawlins at the bank. "Me, I got a purtier badge than yourn."

Ike Niland, rememberiing certain pranks played in the bygone days by this same trio of old-time cowhands, scowled darkly.

"Where'd yuh git that badge, Onion?"

"I taken it off a feller that had no more use for it. A feller that had a bold an' reckless way till us boys gives him a fittin' an' proper initiation into our secret lodge. Ike, that son give up head like a magpie, once he gits goin'. And what he tells about an outfit called the Northwest Land and Finance Company is a-plenty. When we pump his well dry, we takes the proper steps tuh make a general round-up.

"While we are on circle we picks up Howard Snodgrass an' two dudes at Snodgrass's house. We puts Snodgrass an' his friends in yore jail with this talkin' feller. We h'ists a drink and takes the trail uh the others we want. Meanin' this Marley, a feller called Big Meat Drummond, Eric Swanson, and some other dimmer lights, as the sayin' goes."

"Who owned that badge, Onion? Gimme the truth, now."

"The man that owned it died somewhere between the Wyoming line and the Little Rockies, when he was trailin' Big Meat Drummond, the nature uh his ailment bein' lead poisonin', I reckon. Drummond turned in the badge and the feller's papers to Marley, near as I know, and Marley pins the badge on one uh his best men.

"This gent thinks he kin learn somethin' about what become of the money as was lifted from the train robbery at Lodge Crick when The Nighthawk collects his percentage from the railroads, and he hires out to Old Mary as barkeep. He's there when Mary gives Buck Rawlins some money tuh give Uncle Hank Mayberry. He follers Buck an' tries tuh pull a stick-up but he ain't lucky. He gits his horns knocked off and he now reclines in yore jail house. He'll tell it to yuh when yuh ask him. He's a squealin' rat. Now let's git Marley an' his pack uh skunks, Ike."

"I hope you three ol' waddies ain't made any bad mistakes. Yuh shore acted like yuh owned that jail. If Snodgrass an' them others is innocent, look at where it puts me. Where'd yuh git the keys to the jail, anyhow?"

"Tuley Bill manages fer the keys. Him an' a bartender slips a drop uh somethin' in a drink that the house is buyin' fer yore deputy. Yuh worryin' about this two-bit job uh yourn?"

"No. But as long as I'm sheriff, I ain't standin' for a lot uh fool hoss-play. If you three has made a mistake, I'll lock yuh up fer so long that folks will forgit yore names."

"Old Man Afraid of his Hosses," said Tuley Bill testily. "He shore likes tuh rawhide us ol' fellers. Let's ride over an' see the Marley gent, Ike."

Ike nodded gravely and the four men rode on.

It was about half an hour later that they were halted by a shot that kicked up dirt in the dusty trail ahead. They

pulled up. The voice of Angus Murdock came from a ledge above.

"Stand where ye be, men. Ye canna advance farther. Name your business."

"We want to talk to Marley," said Ike Niland.

"I've got neither the time nor the inclination," sounded the caustic voice of Creighton Marley from the rocky ledge, "to waste words with a weak-spined sheriff and three drunken men who draw fighting pay from the 7UP outfit."

"We got Snodgrass and yore two other pardners in jail," bellowed Tuley Bill Baker. "They've told a lot about you, Marley. Yore dirty game is all done here."

A rifle shot droned over Tuley Bill's head. The sheriff and three old cowpunchers eyed one another in baffled silence. Then, without a word, they turned and rode back the way they had come until they found shelter in some boulders.

"Tuley Bill," said Onion, bestowing a withering glare upon that human object of his scorn, "shore does love tuh tip his hand. Marley, if he's got a lick uh sense, will rabbit on us now. Whatever made yuh pop off thataway?"

"He got me mad," explained Tuley Bill weakly. "He got me mad."

"Yuh don't say so?" put in Cutbank Carter.

"Let Tuley Bill alone," said Ike Niland. "Mebbyso he done just right. If Marley gits scared and pulls out, then his hired hands won't have much appetite for fightin'. We'll ketch Marley later on. The Big Meat Drummond feller is safe enough at the sheep wagon, where he's hollerin' like a baby about havin' his hand shot off. Let Marley make a run for it and we'll pick 'im up right now. It'll beat a free fer all fight."

But even as Ike Niland spoke, there sounded the distant crackle of rifle fire. The war was on.

XIX

HOOK JONES, ragged, a blood-stained rag knotted around his head, lay hidden in a buck-brush thicket. His eyes bloodshot and slitted to a pair of glittering lines, watched the wagon where Big Meat Drummond moaned and cursed and begged for more whisky. For hours —hours that had changed from night to dawn and from dawn to daylight—Hook had crouched there in his hiding place, waiting for the chance to kill Big Meat Drummond.

Hook, from his hiding place, had shot Drummond's gun from his hand. He had ridden away into the night on the big white horse. And then, his brain working with a terrible cunning, he had swung out of the saddle and let the white horse go on. He had crept back to his brush patch and had watched the shadows of the men inside the lighted sheep wagon. He had sent a bullet into the wagon, the bullet that smashed through the basin where Buck Rawlins washed his hands. He had chuckled in a grisly fashion when the light was suddenly doused in the canvas-topped wagon.

Hook's was a cunning reasoning that pictured the suffering of Big Meat, there in the dark. Well he knew what was the pain-ridden man's torture for pain is many times more intense in darkness than in the light.

From that same brush patch, Hook Jones had watched Buck Rawlins ride away. He knew that Buck was hunting Guy. He knew that Guy was not far distant, even now, and that Guy had been within gunshot range when Hook's bullet had saved Buck Rawlin's life there at the sheep wagon. And because Hook had, for the first time, realized that the son of Angus Murdock was a real man, Hook's trigger finger had not sent Bill Murdock to eternity. And it pleased Hook Jones now to know that his son Guy had been near and had witnessed the fact that Hook had saved the life of Buck Rawlins.

Buck had left the camp. That was good. Hook had always liked Buck Rawlins. Buck had stood against him, had favored Guy, and he had defied Hook to his face. He had made a bet with Hook that Guy had nerve, more nerve than his father had. Hook, with a certain respect for Buck's opinion, had always secretly hoped Buck was right about Guy.

If Guy had nerve, why didn't he come out and fight? Why hadn't the snivelin' little whelp showed the color of his courage when he sat back and seen Hook shoot the gun outa Big Meat's hand? Why didn't he show up now, instead uh

hidin' somewheres, scared to come out?

"He knows I'll begin shootin' at him, that's why," gritted Hook. "He's scared tuh face the music. He thinks I'll kill him. Which I will, but I'll give him his chances. I'll give him better than an even break. I'll test 'im. If he's got sand, then it'll be me that drops. But if he is as yeller as I figger, then I'll send him tuh where such coyotes goes when they die. I'll . . . I'll test 'im. So help me, I'll run him through the chute."

Now Hook saw Bill Murdock ride away. It was past sunrise. Hook's carbine barrel covered Bill Murdock until the young sheepman had gone, hidden from view by a hogback ridge. Then Hook lowered the hammer of his carbine.

"I COULDA killed 'im," he muttered, grinning twistedly. "Yeh. I coulda killed 'im. But I want tuh git into that wagon first. I gotta have that talk with my friend in there. My ol' pardner Big Meat. And if I'm stopped by a bullet between here an' there, I'll know that I win that bet with Buck Rawlins. Because Guy will be watchin'. If he shoots from the brush, I'll live long enough to git him, somehow."

Hook Jones got to his feet. He stood up boldly and walked, his spurs jingling, toward the wagon where the wounded camp tender and Big Meat Drummond lay on their bunks. Carbine in the crook of his left arm, the steel hook looped into the gun lever, in his right hand a six-shooter, Hook Jones strode to the wagon. A moment later he was inside.

Hook stood there, leering with sun cracked lips at the staring Drummond. Drummond tried to sit up, then gave up the futile struggle against the strips of blanket that Bill Murdock had used to pin the wounded renegade's head and shoulders to the bunk. The blanket strips were passed across the back of Drummond's neck and under the arm pits, then tied under the bunk. Like the wrestler's full-Nelson hold.

"Long time, Big Meat, since my trail an' yore trail crossed. Yuh don't seem proud tuh see me."

"I'm tied down, Hook. Them buzzards cut my hand off. Yuh kain't kill a man that's in the shape I'm in."

Hook gave a quick look toward the wounded camp tender who was conscious, but exhausted, and his eyes strained and fearful.

"Mister," said Hook, "you lay quiet. I ain't a-hurtin' you." He looked in the mess box and found a butcher knife. The keen blade cut the strips of blanket that bound Big Meat. Now Hook spied the jug. He poured out two drinks in tin cups.

"Throw that into yuh, Big Meat. I'm a-doin' the same. You there, Shep, want a shot?"

"I don't drink."

"Then watch the door. If yuh see anybody a-comin', tell me. If yuh don't tell me, I'll live long enough to kill yuh. Me and this big ox is goin' into a pow-wow. Big Meat, this is our last day on this earth. We'll both eat supper in hell. Try tuh die like a man."

It may have been a sort of delirium that gave Big Meat Drummond the courage he now showed. Or it may have been the whisky that put courage into his heart. He swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and forced a grin.

"Give me a gun, Hook, and I'll call the bet. I kin shoot left-handed."

"Me and you, Big Meat, has played our string out. We'll each have a gun when we leave this wagon. You go around one end. I'll take the other. We'll meet around back. I hope yuh don't weaken."

"I'll meet yuh, Hook."

"Got ary word yuh wanta leave, Big Meat?" Hook jerked a thumb toward the wounded camp tender. "This gent will deliver the message."

"I want 'em to know," said Big Meat, facing the wounded camp tender, "that it wasn't me that killed Joe Phelps. Tell 'em it was Eric Swanson. Marley fixed it. He give Swanson the white horse to ride when he done it. The same horse I rode the night I set fire to the Rolling M range. Tell 'em that. I reckon that closes my book."

"Then let's git 'er done," said Hook. "I'll foller yuh out of the wagon, Big Meat. I hope that they feed a man good where we're both goin'. And I hope there's a drink in the jug for us both. Pick up that gun, Big Meat."

THOSE who were there to watch saw that which they could never afterwards forget. They saw Hook Jones and Big Meat Drummond step down out of the sheep wagon. Saw them separate and each start around the covered sheep wagon from an opposite direction. Each man with a six-shooter in his hand.

Now they faced one another at the rear of the wagon. Two guns cracked as one. The two six-shooters belching flame. Big Meat Drummond, sagging at the knees, then falling, laboriously thumbing back the hammer of his gun, trying to send a final bullet into the swaying Hook Jones who was still on his feet.

Hook, a terrible grin stretching his mouth sideways. Hook, bloody, cursing through gritted teeth, his eyes mere slits of glittering red. Hook, pumping bullet after bullet into the dying Drummond, who kept trying to pull back the hammer of a .45.

Drummond, lying on his belly, legs doubled under him, pulling with the last split-ounce of life left him, at that gun hammer. Trying, with the bloody stump of an arm to pull himself up off the reddening ground.

No man who watched made a move to halt that grisly duel. They saw no living man could prevent that which was to be. Big Meat Drummond, fighting desperately for the few seconds remaining between him and the black eternity beyond this life. Struggling to thumb back a gun hammer and take Hook with him into the black pit.

Hook, his unshaven, bleak face stamped by a sardonic grin, shooting at the dying man. Hook, with a spreading smear of blood on his shirt front, swaying on his wide-spread legs, cursing the man whose eyes were glazed with death. Now Hook ejected the empty shells from his .45 and shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers of the cylinder. The hammer clicked back.

Big Meat's head sagged forward on his thick neck. The gun slipped from his nerveless fingers. Big Meat was dead. But the gun that dropped from his hand was empty.

Hook's terrible eyes lifted. His lips, snarling away from yellow teeth, were stained with frothy blood. His voice, harsh, croaking, hardly human, went toward the patch of brush and boulders beyond the wagon.

"Come outa there, young 'un! Step out, yuh young, snivelin', psalm-singin' whelp! Come out and git what I gave to Drummond. Stand on yore feet, yuh Bible-totin', mealy-mouthed little coyote! Come an' git it!"

"I'M comin'!" Guy Jones stepped from the brush. His face drawn and bloodless, his eyes like burning coals in black sockets, limping slowly as he walked toward his father.

There was a six-shooter in Guy's right hand. Limping slowly, but never once flinching. His eyes steady, his manner that of a man who walks toward death. So Guy Jones met his father, Hook Jones, the deadliest killer of them all, the most dangerous man who had ever ridden the outlaw trail. Hook, dying on his feet, a six-shooter in his hand. Hook, weaving in his tracks, his sharpened steel hook discolored with dried blood, more deadly than ever he had been.

Yet Guy Jones did not once falter. His eyes did not once shift from that blood-smeared, terrible figure of his father. Slowly, steadily the space between father and son lessened. Until but a scant ten feet separated them. Now it was Guy who spoke, his voice breaking the strained silence with the brittle noise of shattered glass.

"When you call me a coward, you lie! Here I am!"

A sound that was like a sob broke from the throat of Hook Jones as he faced his son. His face twisted from a snarl into a grimace of pain, then softened into a smile.

"Young 'un," he whispered in a husky voice, "here's my gun. Put 'er away, boy, an' let 'er rust. I'll be a-leavin' yuh now, fer keeps. Leavin' yuh. I got no right tuh ask it of yuh, but I'd like tuh be planted alongside yore mother. And mebbyso, young 'un, you'll forgit how ornery I bin. And yuh'll read a few lines from her Book when they bury me. Here's my gun . . . Tell Buck Rawlins he gits my horse . . . Tell him ol' Hook said . . . said you was a better man than me . . . So-long, young 'un . . ."

XX

THE war was on. Rifles and carbines kicked limerock and sandstone in the faces of the men barricaded behind the strips of rimrock ledges. Angus Murdock sought to still the guns of Marley, Eric Swanson and the other nesters. Deacon Nelson likewise tried to make Eric and his farmers quit shooting. Eric snarled curses at the Deacon, branding the peacemaker as a coward and a traitor to his own kind.

Deacon Nelson shrugged his big shoulders, turned and left his son-in-law, and heedless of his own danger, walked with steady, long-legged strides toward the spot where Guy Jones was covering the dead Hook with a blanket. Guy looked up at his father-in-law with grief-stricken eyes.

"Come to the wagon, son," said Deacon Nelson gently. "A cup of coffee will do you good. You must help me pray that something will halt this fighting. It's wrong, wrong, wrong!"

Inside the sheep wagon, Guy and Deacon Nelson were to get a shock. From the lips of the camp tender they were to learn that Eric Swanson had murdered Joe Phelps, the 7UP cowboy, thus aggravating this conflict.

But two other men were working on that theory already. Bill Murdock and Buck Rawlins were maneuvering so as to come at Eric and Marley from the rear. That meant a long, laborious and roundabout journey.

"If we can surprise 'em, 7UP," said Bill Murdock grimly, "we'll bluff 'em into layin' down. This Eric is our huckleberry. He'll fight. Marley will lay down like a whipped cur."

"Bet a dollar Marley will battle fast and dirty, sheepherder. You take the Swede, I'll handle Marley. We'll creep up on 'em. Throw down on 'em and tell it to 'em scary. And mebbyso we can talk some sense at Angus."

"I hope so, Buck. He's a good man, but stubborn. And Marley has him all ribbed to fight. If we can show Marley up for a snake, then dad will have to give in."

This was before daylight, before the killing of Big Meat Drummond and Hook Jones.

WHEN Guy faced his father, Buck and Bill Murdock were occupying a brush patch behind the Marley gang. They had seen Tuley Bill, Onion, Cutbank Carter and Ike Niland get turned back. Now they had watched Deacon Nelson walk down and take Guy into the sheep wagon. But, because their shelter was but a skippy screen of brush, Buck and Bill dared not make a gun play.

By a bad streak of luck the only available shelter was already occupied. Whether the men hidden there were Marley's men or The Nighthawk's men, they had no way of telling. Trapped in their sleazy brush patch, they were forced to crouch, hardly daring to move for fear of drawing deadly rifle fire. The place had looked all right in the dark, but with daylight the two men saw the folly of their venture.

"Just two ostriches, sheepherder, with their heads bogged in the sand," grinned Buck.

"Yeah. We made great little scouts, cowhand. Great gosh, listen to the argument between Marley and Eric."

"And there sounds Angus Murdock. He's in a ruckus of some sort with Marley and Eric. Listen."

"Ye'll do as I say," roared the voice of Angus Murdock. "I gi' the mon my word I'd no' shoot a gun till sundown. Ye'll guide yoursel's accordin'."

"We'll do nothing of the kind, Murdock," snarled Marley. "We're here to fight and we're going to fight."

"I'll ha' none of it, mon!"

Now came sounds of a scuffle . . . Marley's voice. "Hit 'm again, Eric! Kick his ribs in!"

With an angry growl, Bill Murdock was on his feet, heedless of the bullets that snarled around him. His father was in trouble and Bill was charging to the rescue. Besides Bill ran Buck Rawlins. Now from another rimrock there came the rattle of gunfire. That would be none other than The Nighthawk's men, covering the bold move of Bill Murdock, and Buck Rawlins. Eric Swanson's men and Marley's thugs were splashing the rocks with bullets.

Now there rose a bellow of wrath. Big Angus Murdock, using a rifle for a club, was standing erect, cracking heads, bel-

lowing with glorious abandon, scattering the farmers under Eric's command with his terrific blows.

Now Bill Murdock, within ten feet of where his sire waged war, stumbled, tried to catch his balance, went down. There was a smear of gushing blood on Bill's chest.

Buck bent over him. His eyes met Bill's. Bill, grinning crookedly, his face twisted with pain. "Don't mind me, Buck, Buck, old boy. Get the dirty skunks."

"I'll get 'em, Bill. Darn you, sheepherder, I'll get 'em. Hang and rattle, Shep. If . . . damn 'em, Bill, I'll get 'em! You and I never got along, sheepherder, but I like you better than any man I ever knew . . . I'll get 'em, kid."

BUCK RAWLINS didn't know that he was sobbing. That as he ran on, dry, racking sobs choked from his throat with husky cursing. Now he was with Angus Murdock. Beating at men that seemed to spring from the earth. Now Eric Swanson broke and ran. Marley was with him. Leaving their men to bear the scars of the fight. And those men were now howling for quarter.

"Bill's hurt!" croaked Buck. "These rats are quittin'! Take care of Bill, Angus! I'll handle Marley and his farmers!"

Buck ran, zig-zagging as bullets threw gravel around him. Now he had gained shelter. There sounded the swift thudding of shod hoofs ahead of him. Marley and Eric were making a getaway. Buck saw some horses tied in a brush thicket. A man tried to stop him and Buck smashed his jaw with his rifle barrel. Now Buck Rawlins was in the saddle, riding like a wild man, chasing the two men who had fled.

Behind him he heard shouts and bellowed orders. The voice of Ike Niland declaring the law. The war whoops of Onion. Tuley Bill and Cutbank Carter. The bellowing voice of Angus Murdock. The snarling drone of bullets clipping the brush.

With a sinking heart, Buck realized that he was poorly mounted. The horse he forked was a collar-marked, stiff-jointed animal that evidently belonged to some farmer. Too late now to get a fresh horse. Miles farther on he would be able to get a horse. Down at the river.

Now he'd just have to dog along behind Marley and Eric. Cold trail 'em. Follow their sign. Keep a-goin' till he caught up . . .

Two riders broke the brush near him. Buck pulled up his gun barrel just in time. A split-second's action. The two riders were Deacon Nelson and Guy Jones. Buck had come within an ace of opening fire on them.

"I want that horse, Guy," he barked, leaping to the ground without checking the sluggish buggy horse he was quitting. "Quick, kid!"

"But, Buck, I . . . we . . ."

"Shut up and get off before I pull you out of that saddle. I got a ride to make."

"After Eric?" cried Guy.

"After Eric and Marley." Buck almost pulled Guy from his saddle. Now he was mounted. He heard the confused sounds of Guy's voice and the voice of Deacon Nelson. Now Buck had a horse between his legs. A horse that wore the 7UP iron, a horse that he had given Guy. Now he would cut down the distance between himself and the two men ahead.

Buck knew his bad-lands country. He knew that Marley and Eric Swanson must take either one of two trails that dropped down to the river. He pulled up at the forks of the trail. The sign showed that here the two fugitives had split up. Marley had chosen one trail, Eric the other.

A RIFLE cracked. Buck's face felt the rip of a steel jacket bullet. Now he was shooting blindly at a brush patch, jumping his horse straight through the brush toward the man whose gun was pumping lead. Then he vaulted clear of the saddle and on top of the man who crouched there.

A snarl. A shot that tore past Buck's face. Then Buck was on top of the man, clubbing at his head. A furious, vicious, blood-spattered minute. Then Buck dragged the unconscious Eric onto the trail and tied the man's arms and legs.

"That'll hold you, scissor-bill. I'll just leave you till I can get Marley."

Now he was back in the saddle, riding hard, his ripped cheek spilling blood. A mile, two miles. Now he was almost at

the river bank. Somewhere a shot crashed, echoed, died into silence. Buck pushed harder. Another shot. Then another silence, charged with a tenseness.

Now a voice hailed Buck. A steady, gritty voice. "Hold up, stranger!"

Buck knew that voice. It was the voice of The Nighthawk. "It's Buck Rawlins!" he called back to the hidden man.

"Then listen, Buck Rawlins. Turn back. Marley's gone. You stand where you are while I talk. Tell Ike that I done my best. But a skunk named Eric Swanson shot my horse and figgered he'd shot me. I was afoot and couldn't finish my job. Is Hook Jones dead yet?"

"Hook's dead," replied Buck.

"Tell the boys that Old Mary has money for 'em. Tell Ike that he'll find The Nighthawk's horse dead on a sandbar in the river. The horse Eric shot. Eric killed The Nighthawk. Tell Ike that. If this Eric ain't dead, he'll swear to it.

"In about a month, if Ike or somebody will search the sandbar close, they'll find the body of The Nighthawk, a hundred yards below where yuh'll find the dead horse he was ridin' when this Eric killed him and the horse. The body of The Nighthawk will be kinda buried in the sand and plumb decomposed. But Ike kin identify it by the gun and the spurs and personal things like a watch and some fool medals that The Nighthawk won at bronc ridin' an' ropin'. Them things will be there with the body that'll be too far gone to identify. . . .

"The Nighthawk is dead. Marley got clean away from yuh. Marley has quit the country. *Nobody will ever see Creighton Marley again.*"

"I GET yuh," said Buck quietly. "But before I turn back, there is a message to a certain gent from a girl named Mazie West. She says that this gent is the only man she ever cared two bits for and that if he don't look her up, she'll find him and marry him or shoot him."

"A gent named Hardin Jackson will be in Buenos Aires on the next boat that gets there after he's had about two weeks to square things with some boys that will be joinin' him later on a cow ranch somewhere in the interior. Hardin Jackson. She kin find him at the International Hotel there. If she needs money, Old Mary will fix her up. Got that right?"

"You bet."

"This same Hardin Jackson would be shore proud to have Buck Rawlins hunt him up some time."

"Buck just might do that same thing, stranger. And I'm wishin' him and the little lady all the best luck."

"And right back at yuh. But if he don't high-tail it fer home and marry a game little girl named Colleen Driscoll, he better not sight hisself on my skyline."

"She don't care about me that way."

"No? Yo're loco?"

"Honest?"

"Honest Injun, pardner. Now I'll be goin'. You might be asked if yuh'd seen me. You ain't seen me, have yuh?"

"No stranger, I haven't seen yuh."

"*Adios.* So-long, pardner."

"So-long, pardner."

Buck turned back along the trail. He wrapped a bandage around his cut cheek and hummed softly as he rode. At the spot where he had left the tied Eric, Buck found Deacon Nelson and Guy. Eric was cursing them horribly. Deacon Nelson looked stern and grim and a little sad. He was thinking of the news that he must take to his daughter who was this man's wife. The news that her husband was a cowardly murderer.

"Shut up," Buck told Eric, "or I'll knock you to sleep with a rock. Let's get going. If Bill Murdock dies, this big hunk of mud will hang. He's a murderer."

"God forgive him, he is," said Deacon Nelson. "He is."

A NORTH wind drove a skift of snow across Montana's brown hills. The last train of cattle had been shipped, and the whistle of a locomotive wailed through the leaden dusk. The last steer in the 7UP iron had quit its range.

For there was no more 7UP range. The Murdocks, old Angus and his son Bill—Bill who had missed death by an inch or two and would bear the bullet scar always—would now run sheep there. The Rawlins outfit now belonged to the Murdocks. Even as the nester homesteads would go back from flax and wheat to be passed over by the bands of sheep.

But a few days before, Colleen Driscoll and her father had sold the Rolling M to another sheep outfit. The Rolling M horses, together with the tops of the 7UP remuda, had been shipped to California, bought and paid for by a horse owner there.

The big gates of the Deer Lodge penitentiary had closed on Eric Swanson and his hirelings, and Howard Snodgrass had gone through those gates.

Mazie West had gone. Marley would never again be heard from. The Nighthawk, alias Wade Hardin, was marked off the law books as dead.

Over on Big Warm Creek, Deacon Nelson and Guy Jones preached their gospel and followed their plows.

Ike Niland would continue on as sheriff, ranching on the side.

Buck Rawlins and his bride, who had been Colleen Driscoll, were on the station platform that night, waiting to take the train that led westward toward Arizona and Mexico. On the next train to follow would be riding three oldtime cowmen who hid whatever grief they felt at leaving Montana behind whimsical, gamehearted grins. Bob Driscoll, Dave Rawlins and Uncle Hank Mayberry were hunting a new range.

Maud Snodgrass, so it was told, would be returning in a year to marry Bill Murdock, who had found out where the trail led, by devious route, to its end.

Old Mary was gone. Yesterday she had been seen at Chinook. Dressed in tarnished finery, she had taken the train that carried Mazie West. Like the other old-timers, she was moving on.

Down in the bad-lands, three grizzled old cowpunchers, each well mounted, each with his laden pack-horse, pulled out, headed for the south. Headed for Mexico, where a man can swing a loop without snagging a fence post.

One of the three old cowhands fumbled in the pocket of his angora chaps and found a bottle. Each of his companions produced a corkscrew.

"Onion Oliver," said Tuley Bill Baker testily, "you an' that Cutbank thing kin pull a corkscrew quicker than ever Bat Masterson drawed a gun. An' I bet when we gits down there in Mexico, it'll still be ol' Tuley Bill Baker that supplies what goes with them impliments."

They headed for the bad-lands and hit the rolling prairie. They skirted a barb-wire fence that held acres of plowed ground and a deserted shack with tar-paper roof. Tumbleweeds lodged against the barb-wire fence. They skirted the desolate, deserted homestead, and rode on —headed for a new range. They did not look back.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of LARIAT STORY MAGAZINE, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1941.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared T. T. Scott, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the LARIAT STORY MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Real Adventures Pub. Co., Inc., 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Real Adventures Pub. Co., Inc., 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City; J. G. Scott, 461 Eighth Ave., New York City.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

T. T. SCOTT,
Publisher,

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1941.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1942.)

He muttered, "You asked for it—come an' git it!"

THE NOOSE-CHEATER

By John G. Pearsol

"Kill your pardner or die!" Gunwhipped by a Mex smokeroo, Red Davis drew his sixes on his saddle-mate—to make the play that would brand him a killer or beat the hot lead of a hair-trigger murderer.

HIS boot heels clicking angrily, Sheriff Bill Hazen strode down the boardwalk of Circle City's main street. His worried gray eyes glanced across and saw the three Circle-Cross punchers who watched him. Hazen's leathery forehead corrugated. "They think," he muttered, "that I'm a coyote, too."

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He turned abruptly into a doorway and stopped just inside where a red-necked man with a long, beak-like nose and oily black hair was busily writing on a legal-looking document on his desk.

At the sound of Hazen's feet on the board floor, he looked up. "Hello," he said tightly, and dropped the pen from his bony white fingers.

The sheriff's gray eyes bored into the other's black ones, as he nodded. "Listen," said Hazen, "yuh're makin' fools of all of us, Grogan."

Grogan raised his smooth black eyebrows. "Yes?"

"Yeah," gritted Hazen. He clenched his gnarled fingers and shook his fist under Grogan's nose. "Yuh shore are—I mean it."

He leaned over Grogan's desk.

Grogan leaned back in his swivel-chair and cracked his knuckles with a little clicking sound. His prominent Adam's apple raced convulsively up and down his skinny turkey neck as he replied, "I thought that we'd gone all over that once before."

Hazen leaned forward and placed his other palm down on the desk. "Yeah," he grated, "we went over it once. But we're going over it again."

Grogan's gaze dropped before the menace in the sheriff's voice.

"I sabe," continued Hazen, "just why yuh're so crazy t' stretch Red Davis' neck. I know and ever'body else knows. Yuh're plumb shy of convictions and yuh got a crazy idea in yore head that if yuh don't hang somebody, yuh'll not get re-elected."

Again he shook his fist in the prosecuting attorney's face. "But I wanna tell yuh this—Red Davis don't hang! Sabe that?"

Grogan's eyes glanced furiously over his beak-like nose. "As district attorney," he said, his Adam's apple bobbing, "I'm going to prosecute Red Davis for murdering Curley Rudd. You sabe that?"

Hazen grunted. "Murder!" he spat disgustedly. "Murder, nothin'. It was God's mercy that he had th' guts t' do it. If Curley Rudd was alive today he'd tell Red t' do it again. If you was dying in agony, like Curley was, from th' bite of a hydrophobia skunk, yuh'd beg for a bullet, too, like Curley done. Red was Curley's best friend. That wasn't no murder—it was an act of heroism and kindness." He shook his head uncomprehendingly. "Yuh're funny," he said. "Yuh ain't human. But Red Davis ain't gonna hang, an' by jiminy, that's a threat!"

Grogan's black eyes blazed. "All right," he snapped. "We'll see about that."

Hazen sighed. One corner of his firm, straight mouth drew up whimsically. "Yuh gotta lot t' learn," he said. "An awful lot, Grogan."

The three Circle-Cross punchers had moved down the street and stationed themselves just opposite the attorney's office. When they saw Hazen come out, they trooped across through the dust and sand.

The sheriff's tanned face flushed a deeper shade.

The punchers caught up with him and fell into step beside him, their boot heels clicking and their spurs tinkling. Anxiety shown in their faces.

"What are they gonna do with Red, Sheriff?" began the gray-haired, bow-legged Ringold Pete.

Hazen stared straight down the hot, dusty street. "I dunno," he answered.

Pete's eyes were troubled. He glanced sidewise at the sheriff's hard face. "They ain't—gonna hang him, are they?" he asked.

Hazen didn't answer immediately. Ringold glanced meaningly at the other Circle-Cross punchers.

"Are they?" he asked again.

"I'm not," said Hazen steadily. "I dunno what Grogan will do."

"We was there," said Pete. "We'll testify for Red."

Hazen paused in his stride and faced the Circle-Cross punchers.

"Yuh seen Red shoot Curley, didn't yuh?" he demanded.

They nodded.

"Then, in th' eyes of th' law," said Hazen grimly, "Red committed murder."

"But—" began one of the punchers.

"Yeah, I know," interrupted Hazen, "Curley was dying in a fit and cutting himself t' pieces in that bobbed wire. But th' law don't allow no extenuatin' circumstances for murder."

"But when a hoss breaks a leg," began Ringold Pete.

"This was a million times worse," agreed Hazen. "Just th' same, Grogan's gonna

prosecute. An' if he can get a jury, there ain't much hope for Red."

AT the door of the jail the three punchers left as Hazen mounted the steps. Inside, he chucked his gray felt hat on a peg and started toward the rear of the building. He reached a cell in the narrow hallway and looked within. The light was dim.

A red-headed, freckled, square-jawed puncher sat in an attitude of dejection on a narrow wooden bunk. He raised his head as Hazen pulled from his pocket a jangling bunch of keys. The sheriff unlocked the door and Red Davis' blue eyes lighted.

Hazen shook his head. "No, Red," he said. "They're gonna hold yuh."

"I'll swing, then. Unless—"

Red Davis sank back on his bunk. His eyes clouded. Hazen drew a three-legged stool into the open doorway of the cell and sat down. He drew from his flannel shirt pocket a sack of tobacco and some papers and started rolling quirleys. He kept his troubled gray eyes on his gnarled fingers as he fashioned the cigarettes.

Neither man spoke for a time. Red's eyes looked frequently from the handful of cigarettes to Hazen's impassive face.

"Gonna smoke a lot?" he suggested after a while.

"No." Hazen shook his head. "Nope. Thought mebby we'd talk a little bit. Thought mebby yuh was lonesome, Red."

Red's eyes were appreciative. The sheriff kept to his cigarette making until the little sack of tobacco was exhausted. Then he looked up.

"I talked with Grogan," he said. "He's a fool. If Jim Harrison was district attorney, yuh'd be back at th' Circle-Cross right now."

Hazen stared steadily into Davis' questioning eyes. "I just wanted t' tell yuh, Red," he explained, "that Grogan's hell on wheels an' he'll stick yuh if he can." He shook his head. "An'—he prob'ly can."

The sheriff shoved back the wooden stool and clanged shut the door of the cell. Red Davis arose and came forward, grasping the bars. Hazen handed him the cigarettes.

"So," said the sheriff, "just in case—in case yuh—anything hapens, don't fail t' take advantage of it. Most ever'body in th' county feels th' same way I do. But Grogan'll get a change of venue. He'll claim they'd be prejudiced here and move yore trial some place else."

He lit a quirley. "Then, Red," he added, as his gray eyes sought the steel ceiling, "they'd hang yuh."

Abruptly he turned and walked heavily down the cell-lined hall toward his office.

Red's glance followed him. "Thanks, Bill," he called softly as the sheriff paused at the end of the hall.

Hazen smiled queerly. "There ain't nothin' t' thank me for at all, Red," he said "—not yet."

In his office, the sheriff opened a drawer in his desk and drew forth a heavy brass key. He compared it carefully with one of the keys on the ring he carried. Satisfied, he placed it in his shirt pocket. As he looked up, his eyes fell on a reward notice tacked to the wall behind his desk. A thousand dollars was offered for the capture of the Mexican bandit, Aguilla.

Hazen's gnarled fingers reached out and ripped the notice from the wall. He folded the paper, shoved it into a hip pocket and went outside.

He crossed the dusty street and entered Mooney's Restaurant. As the screen door slammed behind Hazen, a fat, good-natured hombre wearing a dirty white apron looked up from his stove.

"Howdy, Bill," he greeted.

"'Lo, Mooney," said Hazen. He sat down on a stool and leaned an elbow on the stained pine counter. "Fix up a dinner for Red, will yuh?"

Mooney nodded. "Sure."

Hazen waited while Mooney shuffled to the rear of the restaurant and worked over his sizzling stove. Presently, Mooney slid a filled tray along the counter. "All right, Bill," he said, "here she is."

"How much, Mooney?"

Mooney stuck out his hand. "Four bits."

Hazen dropped a coin into the fat palm. Mooney turned to put the money in a drawer farther along under the counter. Hazen's hand darted to his shirt pocket and brought forth the heavy brass key. He slipped it quickly under the white cloth which covered the tray.

"SAY," he said suddenly to Mooney, "will yuh take this over for me? Yuh can shove it through th' slit in th' door of th' cell. I just remembered I gotta see Grogan right away."

Mooney tucked his apron up under his vest. "Sure," he answered. "Glad to. Wanna see Red anyway." He looked searchingly into Hazen's cool, gray eyes. "They gonna hang 'im, Bill?"

The sheriff studied his calloused palm thoughtfully. "Well," he said slowly, "they're gonna try awful hard."

Mooney grunted, "Umph," and went out with the tray, followed by the sheriff.

Grogan seemed annoyed when Hazen re-entered the district attorney's office. "Well?" he snapped.

The sheriff walked across the room, grabbed a chair and scraped it across the rough floor to Grogan's desk. Hazen sat down and crossed his legs. "I gotta go away," he said.

Grogan lifted his black eyebrows. "Yes?"

Hazen nodded. "Yeah," he said in a bothered tone. "There's a lotta reports comin' in on this Aguilla jasper. I gotta get 'im." He paused while his steady gray eyes caught the piercing glance shot at him by the red-necked district attorney. "Or I won't get re-elected either," added Hazen.

Grogan smiled as he clasped his white hands together and cracked his knuckles. "Oh! I see. You're beginning to realize that a fellow has to look out for Number One, eh?"

Hazen blew smoke at the toe of his worn leather boot. "Yeah," he agreed. "I been doin' a lotta thinkin'."

Grogan nodded understandingly. "You're getting some sense."

"Yeah, mebby so. But if yuh don't see me for a long time, yuh'll know where I am." He arose and started toward the door. "Tell Sam where I've gone an' t' stay aroun' close till I get back," he said.

Grogan nodded. "All right, Bill. Sam's a good deputy, ain't he?"

"Yeah." Hazen turned with a hand on the door frame. "Yeah, Sam's all right. He'd make a good sheriff. An' Jim Harrison would make a good district attorney, too," he added tightly.

Grogan smiled thinly at Hazen's back as the sheriff went out through the door. "Yeah," he mimicked while his pointed Adam's apple raced up and down. "Sam would make a good sheriff. And if you get so chicken-hearted very often, Sam *will* be a good sheriff."

But Hazen couldn't hear that remark as he strode smartly to the rear of the jail. He saddled his roan gelding and mounted. Then he rode to a sand-scoured frame house at the edge of Circle City.

HE drew up and called to a lanky man sitting on a chair on the porch. "Howdy, Jim," he called. "I thought I'd find yuh here 'bout dinner time."

Jim Harrison stood up and raised his hand. "Hyah, Bill," he greeted. "Light and come in."

Hazen shook his head and eased himself in his saddle. "Nope," he said, "I'm leavin'. Just wanted t' say *adios*."

Harrison seemed to catch the peculiarity of the sheriff's tone. He left the porch and ambled out to the big roan gelding. He studied Hazen's face. "Where yuh goin'?"

The sheriff smiled. "I told Grogan I was goin' after Aguilla. Mebby I'll be gone quite a spell."

The tall Harrison raised an eyebrow. "Alone, huh?"

"Yeah, alone." The sheriff's eyes held steady.

"Well," drawled Harrison, "if anybody can git that Aguilla jasper, you can do it, Bill. *Adios* and luck to you."

"Same t' you, Jim," said Hazen. He lowered one eyelid suggestively. Then he turned the roan's head and galloped away, taking a trail that led south from town. About ten miles from Circle City he headed the gelding into the lacy mesquite. At the crest of a small rise he dismounted, sat down cross-legged, and waited.

It had been dark for nearly two hours when Hazen heard the mutter of approaching hoof beats. He glued his eyes to the trail which could be faintly discerned under the pale starlight. As the speeding rider came abreast, the sheriff saw that it was Red Davis. The pounding hoofs dwindled away to silence before Hazen arose stiffly, a whimsical smile on his firm lips.

"Too good a lad," he said aloud as he gazed southward toward where the rider had vanished, "too dang good a lad t' have a rope aroun' his neck."

He put a hand to his throat as though he could feel the roughness of choking hemp. "Now I gotta stay away, I guess," he muttered. "But it was th' only thing I could do for Red. We'll both have t' ride th' out trails ffom now on, I guess."

LOS VENTRES was a huddle of 'dobe shacks bunched together as if for protection. Surrounding the dismal community stretched a sea of gray-green mesquite drooping under the fierce rays of the scorching sun. Down the short, single street of the town rode six horsemen, their leader, a gaudily dressed Mexican, astride a smooth-coated black mare. He wore a six-gun at either hip in hand-tooled leather holsters.

In addition to four other Mexicans, dressed in ragged clothing, there rode an American, red-headed, freckled, blue-eyed. His square jaw was hard and the muscles of his face bunched in muscular furrows. But his eyes were haggard—haunted. He wore the conventional working costume of the range, with only a bright red scarf to lend a note of color to his attire.

At the last, and biggest, house in the line of 'dobe shacks the cavalcade halted in a flurry of dust. With jingling spurs, the riders dismounted and flocked into the cantina where they lined up at the bar tended by a black-haired, tawny-faced breed girl.

The leader tipped back his ornamental sombrero, grinned an oily smile at his companions, and heaved a heavy canvas sack upon the bar.

"Aah," said Aguilla with silky satisfaction, *"aqui. Mucho dinero."*

The eyes of the Mexicans glittered greedily. The red-headed American stared gloomily at the breed girl. She produced a big black bottle and poured drinks for the six riders. Red Davis closed his eyes and gulped the liquor with a single violent jerk of his head. Then he poured himself another and drank that.

Aguilla grasped the heavy sack and moved over to a round wooden table in the cantina. Dramatically he paused and glanced at his companions who crowded around. Then he tilted the sack and poured its clinking contents out on the table.

"Oro," he breathed. "Gold."

Carefully he counted out the coins into six piles, the stack before him twice as large as any of the other five. His four Mexican followers eagerly clutched their shares. A sixth pile remained on the table and Aguilla looked up to locate the man who was so slow in claiming his part of the spoils. Red Davis still stood at the bar, pouring another drink.

"Ah, Señor Davis," called Aguilla smoothly. "Come here wan minute."

Leisurely, Red threw a glance at the braid-wealthy Mexican. "Awright," he answered lazily. "I'll be there."

He turned his back again and gulped a glass of liquor. The black-eyed Mexican stared at the broad, powerful shoulders, then turned and looked at his companions. Davis turned from the bar and lazed toward them.

"The señor ees seeck, nó?" inquired Aquilla suavely.

Davis shook this head. "Nope. Nothin's the matter with me."

Aguilla's silky voice suddenly hardened. "I theenk the señor lies," he said coldly. A grim smile twisted his stiff, thin lips as he saw the chill that entered Red's eyes. "Leesten," he went on, his glance watchful and his right hand poised close to the grip of his gun, "the gringo señor joined my leetle company a month ago. He was then veree reckless, no? But een all these time he has done *nada*—nothing. Sabe? Nothing at all. Las' night wan that hombre he shot at us, what deed the Señor Davis do? Keel heem? Ah, no. He *meesed*—" His eyes bored into Red as he added venomously "—and on purpose!"

Red Davis tensed expectantly, his own hand hovering close to his gun.

"But," Aguilla shrugged his shoulders, "we geev you another chance. An' then, eef you fail—" he paused, and left the threat unfinished.

Davis smiled coldly at him.

Behind them, the breed girl snapped a quick glance toward the door. It swung open. She hissed softly. Instantly the men in the cantina flashed out their guns and trained them on the door.

THROUGH the doorway slowly walked a gray-eyed man wearing a silver star on his chest, and a holster swung low on his hip. Sheriff Hazen's eyes opened in surprise and chagrin as he looked into the muzzles of the guns pointed at him.

He sighed. "Well," he said, "that's that, I guess."

His glance swiftly scanned the men, then clung to the gaudily dressed Mexican:

"'Pears like yuh've got me, Aguilla," he admitted.

Aguilla laughed. His voice rasped like a file on cold steel. "The sheriff has right," he said. "An'," he asked, "eef you had caught me w'at would you do weeth me?"

Hazen shrugged. "You sabe that, I guess," he said simply.

Aguilla's eyes slitted. *"Si,"* he agreed.

"The sheriff he would stretch Aguilla's neck, no?" He thrust his brown face forward and spread his arms apart in a gesture of helplessness. "So," he said, "what ees Aguilla to do? Thees turn about ees what you call fair play."

He made a chuckling noise in his throat. "What you would do, Aguilla weel do. But the rope, he ees so slow an' what you call undignified."

Again Hazen shrugged. "All right," he agreed. "Suit yoreself."

Aguilla whirled suddenly and glared at Red Davis. "Remember what Aguilla said?" he demanded. "Thees ees your last chance."

Red's blue eyes were puzzled. He shook his head.

Aguilla laughed. "No? Eef you fail, then eet weel be too bad that Aguilla weel have to keel you."

Red's eyes froze to Hazen's impassive face as he nodded his understanding of the bandit's desire.

Aguilla chuckled again. He jerked his head toward Hazen while he kept his eyes on the side of Red's freckled face. "You weel keel thees hombre," he said. "He ees a sheriff. He has been hunting us—hunting you—anyone who rides weeth Aguilla. You have been weeth us a month but you have done *nada.* You keel thees sheriff an' then you weel be one of us."

The red-headed cowboy seemed paralyzed. His eyes fastened to Hazen's. But the sheriff stared straight past him. Aguilla watched Red like a snake watching a bird.

"Go ahead," urged Aguilla. "Shoot heem in the belly!"

Slowly, Red Davis turned. Like little saucers, his eyes were open, while beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He opened his mouth twice before he spoke. "Now?" he asked, low-voiced.

Grinning, Aguilla nodded. "Now, or I—" He drew his own gun.

Red Davis turned back to face Hazen. The sheriff smiled, a look of resignation in his calm gray eyes. "All right, kid," he said. "Go ahead. Let 'er rip."

As in a trance, Red Davis moved. Slowly he drew and raised his gun and pointed it at the man who had saved him from hanging. He cast a quick, nervous glance at the others. They were watching him like hawks. Bill Hazen watched, too. Red cocked his gun. The click sounded in the silence like someone slapping two little pieces of steel together.

Hazen stood erect and threw back his shoulders. "All right, son," he said. "Shoot straight."

Davis nodded. His finger showed white where it tightened around the trigger. He aimed the gun steadily, sighted straight along the barrel into Hazen's gray eyes. For an instant he glanced beyond the sheriff and then met the officer's gaze again. Hazen's eyes widened just a trifle. "All right, mister man," said Red, "I'll shoot straight. Yuh can gamble on it."

He squeezed the trigger.

Crack.

Hazen jerked—spun around. His hands flew to his chest. His head sagged, and he staggered. Then he toppled over, and sprawled upon his face on the rough board floor of the *cantina.*

Red holstered his gun.

AGUILLA chuckled. The others shoved their guns into their holsters, but the leader, more cautious, held his in his brown hand as he strode over and pushed Hazen with the toe of his gayly ornamented boot. Red, gun smoking in hand, watched Aguilla closely. Hazen's body rolled loosely as Aguilla kicked it.

"Muy bien, señor," he smiled at Red. "Now I am satisfy. Let us have the drink to celebrate."

Davis nodded and shoved his gun into his holster as the bandit and his followers crowded to the bar. The breed girl again produced the black bottle and rapidly poured liquor. Red raised a glass in his left hand. "We'll take a drink," he said. "If anybody has objections let 'im speak now or forever hold his peace."

Grinning, they all raised their glasses.

Like a snake uncoiling, Bill Hazen swiftly sat up, gun in hand. Too late, those facing the bar caught the look of terror in the breed girl's eyes, and wheeled around. Back to the wall, Sheriff Hazen stood, guns pointed at the bandit crew.

"Gents," he said icily, "I objects."

Red Davis stepped away from the bar, grabbed his irons, and pointed them at the bewildered Mexicans. "Dam', Bill," he said, "I was scared t' death yuh wouldn't catch on."

"I got it, Red," Hazen thanked him with his voice. "I knew what yuh was goin' t' do when yuh looked behind me thataway."

Aguilla cursed.

"Shut up!" snapped Red. He turned again to Hazen. "Now what?" he asked.

"Tie 'em up. Get their guns an' we'll take 'em along."

Red shook his head. "Can't do it, Bill. Aguilla's got pretty near a hundred breeds an' Mexes around here. They'd pot us afore we could get a hundred yards."

Aguilla laughed shortly. "The Señor Davis ees right, Sheriff. You weel not go far. An' when Aguilla's turn come—"

The red-headed puncher swung toward him. "Now—you shut up!" he said slowly. "An' stay shut!"

Aguilla's face paled at what he saw in Red's cold eyes.

Hazen's head shook stubbornly. "Nothin' doin'," he said. "We take 'em or we don't go. Take th' shells outa their guns an' put 'em in their holsters. Get 'em on broncs in front of us an' if they don't act natural—out go their lights!"

Davis unloaded the bandits' guns.

Hazen grinned coldly at Aguilla. "Easy an' nice," he said. "Yuh'll walk out ahead of us. Yuh'll ride slow in front an' if any questions is asked we're just gonna take a little *pasear*. Sabe?"

Aguilla nodded. His black eyes glittered balefully, but he started toward the door. Watched closely by Davis and Hazen he mounted. In the mesquite screen beyond Los Ventres, the party stopped and the captors took the ropes from their saddle horns and securely tied the five bandits.

As they rode on, Aguilla continually glanced back over his shoulder. Leaving the mesquite tangle where it gave way to sparsely grassed hills and sandy gulleys, Davis and Hazen glanced back, too, and discovered fifty or more horsemen spurring after them. Hazen jerked his eyes questioningly to Red.

"Th' breed girl in th' *cantina*," shouted Red. "She must heard us an' tipped 'em off."

Aguilla laughed, his silky voice full of restored confidence. "An' now, señores," he called exultantly, "we'll see who laughs last."

They lashed their horses. The hoofs of the animals pounded a drumming tattoo, but the pursuers gained. Hazen prodded the broncs ridden by the bandits but the animals responded half-heartedly.

The pursuers shortened the gap and started to shoot at the fugitives. Slugs from their rifles occasionally screamed past the ears of Red and Hazen. But the distance was too great for accurate shooting, particularly from the backs of galloping horses.

Hazen on his roan gelding yelled at Red. "I didn't think they'd shoot. For fear of hittin' Aguilla."

The Mexican was saffron with fear. He evidently realized the danger of being hit by an unlucky shot.

The sheriff glanced over his shoulder as the whizzing slugs became more frequent and zipped by uncomfortably close. Above the pounding of hoofs on the sandy trail and the creaking of leather on the foam-flecked horses, he shouted: "No use, Red. Leave the skunks go. We'll have t' ride."

They spurred their mounts and swiftly drew away from Aguilla and his bound companions. The Mexicans yelled insults as the sheriff and the puncher fled.

"I don't like th' idea," yelled Hazen, "of runnin' like this."

Red, riding Aguilla's strong black mare, didn't answer except to urge the animal

to greater speed. Over his shoulder he saw that the band of horsemen had halted to untie their leader and his companions. Swiftly the fugitives increased the distance between them and the Mexicans.

But now the latter again took up the chase. Aguilla was not to be cheated of his prey, of revenge. The country was almost level now, a treeless, rolling plain, sparsely grassed. Far to the rear could be seen the enraged bandit sticking persistently to the trail.

Ahead lay a ribbon of silver, the Rio Cruze, forming the northern boundary of the plain. On the other side of the stream began a sharp incline leading to the rocky, serrated, treeless chain of rough hills. On the other side of those hills, Red knew, began another stretch of mesquite that continued in an almost unbroken sea of dull green almost to the very outskirts of Circle City.

The Rio Cruze formed the limit of the bandits' range. Aguilla would never dare cross the those hills, thought Red. The river and the hills spelled safety.

Red's freckled, sweating forehead corrugated as he suddenly realized that there was no safety for him. South of the river, the bandit thirsted for revenge, and north of it Red knew he was wanted for murder. But Hazen, at least, would be safe after the river crossing was made.

Mounts laboring, the two raced onward. Down into the cooling stream. Water, splashing fountain high, sprayed from the plunging hoofs of the horses and cascaded hissingly over the hot, dusty riders.

A startled yell from Hazen. A bigger splash. On the farther bank, Red Davis turned to see what had happened. Bill Hazen was down. Knee deep in the water he stood while his mount ran erratically back toward the south bank of the Rio Cruze.

RED spurred his black mare back into the water. As he stopped near Hazen, the animal seemed nervous, fearful. Hazen was deeper in the water than he had been a moment ago. The mare plunged desperately and fought against the tight reins. Red Davis cursed the trembling animal.

"Bill," he called, "get out. I'll catch yore bronc."

Hazen's gray eyes looked appealingly at the puncher. He shook his head. "Quicksand," he said.

Cold, fearful, Red Davis grabbed for Hazen's gnarled hand. The black mare plunged and reared, fearfully aware of the danger. Red jerked the animal's straining head around and again reached for Hazen. No use. The horse would not get closer to the treacherous sinking bottom.

Red's glance followed Bill's hopeless gaze. Around Aguilla's saddle horn should have hung a rope. But, like their own, it had been used to tie up the bandits when they first left Los Ventres.

Hazen sank deeper. In desperation, Red Davis leaped from the back of the mare and jumped into the sand beside the frantically struggling sheriff. One hand clutching fiercely the stirrup leather, his other grabbed Hazen's outstretched arm by the wrist. Davis clucked to the mare and grimly set his teeth to endure the terrific strain.

But as the animal plunged away, Red's grip on the sheriff's wrist slipped. The mare dragged the cursing cowboy from the sand, and Red's boots were left in its gluey grip.

The sheriff had sunk to his hips. His burning eyes watched the puncher's efforts to extricate him. Bootless, almost exhausted cruelly cut his tender feet, Red ran desperately along the banks of the river, searching for a tree, a limb, anything that he might use to save the sinking officer. But this country here was treeless and he found not even a piece of driftwood.

Hazen's hips had disappeared. The water licked around his waist. "Red," called Hazen, "go on an' save yore hide. I'm a goner. Aguilla an' them fellas'll be here pretty quick. Go ahead, Red. Go on, boy."

"Shut up, Bill." Red paced back and forth, thinking desperately. "I ain't goin'."

Lower sank Hazen. Red stopped his futile pacing as he heard the distant mutter of hoofs. He jerked his head toward the south and saw the dust cloud stirred up by the on-coming bandits.

Davis turned his blue eyes back to Sheriff Hazen. "Bill," he called softly, "I sabe what yuh're thinkin', Bill. I sabe

that's a hell of a way 't die. But I ain't gonna leave yuh, Bill. We'll see this thing through t'gether."

The big-boned puncher drew his gun and deliberately walked into the water, striding straight to where Hazen struggled against the powerful suction of the quicksand. Red Davis squatted in the sand beside Hazen. The water came above the puncher's knees and Davis felt the clutch of the sand as it took hold around his legs and started to drag him down with Hazen.

"Yuh damn' fool," shouted Hazen, almost hysterical, "yuh can't do me any good, an' th' sand'll get yuh, too."

Slowly Davis shook his head as the pounding hoofbeats sounded louder. Yells, shrill and exultant, came from the bandit gang as the spurring riders saw the predicament of their quarry.

"Take it easy, Bill," said Red. His eyes, red-rimmed and smoldering, watched the rapid approach of Aguilla. "I'm gonna do th' same thing I did for Curley if I have to. But Bill—I ain't gonna live after it. Not no more. We'll cheat Aguilla an' th' quicksand both."

Sheriff Hazen looked deep into the freckled puncher's blue eyes and smiled at what he saw there. The water lapped just below his armpits. Hazen's gray eyes were steady and fearless as he stared calmly into the muzzle of Red's gun.

"Thanks, Red," he said evenly. "I'd do th' same for you."

A THUNDER of hoofs sounded from the north bank of the Rio Cruze. Shrill yells and curses, deep and throaty. Then, a crash of rifles.

Startled, Red lowered his gun as the bandit pack slid to a halt. Bullets screamed over the heads of the two men in the river as the Mexicans on the south bank returned the fire of the posse on the north. Then, yelling defiantly, the outlaws turned and fled back toward Los Ventres.

Riders splashed into the river. Ropes hissed through the air and settled around the two men in the quicksand. Horses pulled and strained. Hazen groaned with the pain of the rope under his armpits. But he came out—slowly. Ropes creaked from saddle horns as Red Davis was dragged from the clutching quicksand.

On the bank of the Rio Cruze, Davis watched Aguilla and his pack flee from the spiteful rifles of a dozen bronze-faced buckaroos who chased after the bandits. Then he knelt, under the watchful eyes of those of the posse who had remained behind, over the unconscious Hazen. The freckled puncher splashed water in the sheriff's leathery face.

Hazen groaned and opened his eyes. For a moment, he looked around dazedly. Then his gray eyes gladdened as they rested on a tall, lanky rider who was looking intently at him.

"Harrison," said Hazen, "and Sam. Yuh're all a bunch of good news."

The tall rider knelt beside him. "We got yore word," he said, "that yuh sent by th' waddy. So we hightailed it for Los Ventres as soon as we could. Yuh ought to waited for us 'fore yuh went in there."

He arose and looked at the moody Red Davis. "But I guess we come in time."

Davis turned his freckled face southward and saw the rest of the posse returning. "Well," he said, his voice low, almost a whisper, "I reckon I'll go back. I'll go an' take my medicine."

Hazen sat up suddenly and his eyes hardened as he looked from Red to Harrison. "Red ain't gonna get hung," he said positively, "not while I'm livin'."

There was a twinkle in Harrison's brown eyes. He grinned, wide-mouthed. Sam, Hazen's deputy, grinned too.

"All right," said Harrison, "suit yoreself about that. But there's been some things happened since yuh left Circle City a month ago." He started toward his horse. "Stay here if yuh want to," he continued, "but I reckon I oughta tell yuh I've been elected District Attorney. And Bill, yuh've been relected sheriff."

Hazen and Red stared.

Harrison grinned at Red. "As my first official act, Red," he said, "I *nolle prossed* Grogan's case against yuh."

Red's jaw dropped as Harrison turned away. *"Nolle prossed?"* he yelled. "What th' devil' is *nolle prossed?"*

The new District Attorney turned his head toward Red. *"Nolle prossed,"* he winked solemnly, "is one o' them dang legal dinguses that means yuh ain't accused o' nothin' no more. Sabe that?"

TRIGGER-BOSS OF VINEGARROON RANGE

By John Starr

A strange bond held that motley crew of cutthroats to their trust. But stranger still was the glittering promise that lured them all to gunman's tryst on the banks of the sinister Rio.

RIDING beside Madero Mullen, young Kid Barlow drew his bronc to a halt as the two officers stepped into their path at the head of the bridge leading from Presidio to Ojenaga. The Kid's eyes, grey expressionless pools of flint, looked heavy-lidded at the two officers. Madero Mullen, dark-lined face drawn into a smirk, snorted slightly though his beak of a nose.

"We stop," said the Kid, "I suppose."

"Like any other suspected crook," Pete Parsons, the younger of the two officers, said cuttingly, "you stop."

The other officer, older, a badge reading, "U. S. Customs," on his shirt front, shook his grizzled head slightly at Parsons.

"Goin' an' comin'," he said softly to the Kid. "Everybody stops here now. That's th' new law."

Mullen, dark face still wearing a smirk, showed his yellow teeth as he smiled.

"Well," he said impatiently, "do we stop all day? We ain't got nothin'. Yuh think we're a couple o' smugglers?"

Blue eyes flashing, Parsons swore softly. "Smugglers," he breathed, sarcasm in his voice. "Hell yes, I think yuh're a smuggler. I *know* it. An' that ain't all. I hope to get yuh—away from the bridge—where nobody is." His eyes blazed afresh as he leaned forward. "An' when I do," he went on softly, "there won't be no trial. *Sabe* what I mean, Mullen?"

Dark, heavy-veined, Mullen's lids drew down over his eyes. Smiling, his teeth showed again.

"Yeah," he said, voice penetrating, "I *sabe*, Parsons." Between the slitted lids, Mullen's eyes threw mockery at Parsons. A bleak wintry smile flitted for an instant over the Kid's granite features. His eyes, still expressionless, gazed straight into the questioning orbs of the older officer, Freeman. Then his eyes looked upriver in the direction of Cordas Island. And looking at Freeman, he talked to Parsons.

"A bet," he murmured. "I'd bet as much as two *pesos*, mister lawman, that yuh don't do no ketchin'. Not unless yuh rise n' shine mighty early in the mornin'."

The Kid turned his head to grin at Mullen. Old Freeman waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. Jingling their spurs, the Kid and Mullen urged their broncs out on the rickety bridge. Young Parsons, a jagged smile on his lips, hate in his eyes, watched them jog across the loose planks. Absently, he rubbed his hand against the gun butt at his hip.

"Damn their souls," he gritted, tense-voiced, and turned away to gaze upriver. "The stinkin' coyotes!"

Fiercely, he threw a cigarette stub on the ground, stomped it with a high boot heel. "They killed Frank Richie. I know dang well they did. I wouldn't be surprised if that new Kid did it. He showed up here right after Frank was killed." His voice was thick with hate.

Smiling queerly, old Freeman watched the disappearing backs of Mullen and the Kid. "At two," he said musingly, "At two—early in the mornin'—we make a catch up near Cordas. An' Parsons, it wasn't *proved* that anybody in particular killed Richie."

Slowly, Parsons turned. Long, resentment in his eyes, he studied Freeman. "I don't *sabe* you, Freeman," he finally said. "Yuh talk like yuh kinda favor this Kid

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"This time I'll finish it," he told the girl.

fella, whoever he is. Mebby he didn't kill Richie, but he's trailin' with a bunch o' skunks. An' I hope he's in the batch we get at two in the mornin'."

Old Freeman smiled again—whimsically. He looked from Parsons to where Mullen and the Kid had ridden off the bridge end.

"Old fire-eater," he said to Parsons, "I gotta hunch—he'll be right there."

"At two in the morning." Had Freeman repeated the words of the Kid? Parsons squinted thoughtfully at the grizzled officer.

"I sure hope so," he spat. The hate had not left his voice.

OJENAGA—Vinegarroon Range Francisco's Cantina. Behind Madero Mullen, the Kid entered the doors of the saloon. Yellow in the early dusk, the lamps in the smoke-filled room threw a golden haze about the place.

Straight to the bar, through a maze of tables, Mullen and Kid Barlow stalked stiff-legged.

Slapping yellow sand dust from his shirt front, slipping his wide-brimmed

sombrero back on his head, the Kid stopped beside the dark man.

To the fat, greasy-faced, Mexican barkeep, Mullen said, "Whisky."

The Kid nodded, eyes straying about the room.

About ten girls mixed with the crowd of men in the place. All of them—all but one—had too much paint on their faces, and wore short-skirted, sleeveless dresses. This other girl, eyes seeming to hold a suggestion of hardness on their own, watched intently the broad back Mullen presented to the room. The Kid caught her gaze. And she let her lids slide down over her eyes. The lines about her straight-lipped mouth deepening, she started a careless saunter toward the bar.

A Chinaman, with two other Chinks and a Mexican, said something to the girl as she passed their table. Stopping, she turned her head, looked levelly at the four. The Mexican shook his head at the Chinamen.

"Mullen's girl," he whispered to them.

They dropped their eyes to the table top. The girl smiled and came on toward the bar. Stopping behind the Kid and Mullen, she placed one hand on Mullen's shoulder.

"Back?" she asked. Then, "Howdy," to the Kid.

Mullen turned his head, grinned at her. She smiled. But the hardness back in her eyes didn't disappear. The Kid frowned at her back as she walked beside Mullen to a door marked "Private," and entered with him.

"She's good," he muttered to himself, hand going into his vest pocket for makin's, "But she hates somebody. Me? Or Mullen?"

Black eyes shining, the fat barkeep leaned over the bar. "What you say?" he asked.

Lips turning down coldly, the Kid smiled.

"It looks a lot like rain," he said mockingly.

The Kid's fingers fumbled with something in his vest pocket. He started to withdraw it, stopped. He looked carelessly about the room, then started toward the door. His fingers still stayed in his vest pocket.

With his left hand, he pushed open the door and stepped outside. It was nearly dark. The Kid glanced up and down the street. Except for a man who came toward the Kid, the street was empty. Watching this fellow, the Kid waited, hand still in his vest pocket.

The man came closer. Near the Kid, he stopped, peered squintingly through the dusk at the Kid.

"'Lo, Poggin," said the Kid.

Poggin, squat, black stubble on his dark chin, cursed. "Yuh damn double-crossin'—" he began.

His hand streaked backward. The Kid jerked. His hand flashed down—up! His gun flamed. Poggin, incoherent mutterings coming from his lips, stumbled forward. Stepping aside, the Kid watched him fall, waited till the twitchings of Poggin's legs had ceased.

Then the Kid sheathed his gun. Glancing quickly up and down the deserted side street, he ducked into the shadows between two buildings. Running through the darkness, he came to another dusty thoroughfare. Near an open window he halted, pulled a balled scrap of paper from his vest pocket.

In the yellow light, it read:

Madero Mullen killed Frank Richie.

The Kid cursed. Who had placed that note in his pocket? The girl? Did she know?

Flecks of fire in the ice of his eyes, the Kid strode again toward Francisco's Cantina. At the door he paused, eased his guns in their holsters. Had anyone seen the Kid kill Poggin? Poggin, Francisco's man. Did Mullen know whatever it had been to make Poggin forget that he could never hope to match the speed in the Kid's gun hands?

Eyes cold and watchful, hands easy at his sides, the Kid pushed on the Cantina door with his boot.

INSIDE the "Private" room at Francisco's, the girl who had entered with Mullen, stopped just beyond the door. Suspicion of a cold smile on her lips, she watched Mullen's back as he took off his vest and threw it on a chair. The hard light flamed in her eyes as he unbuckled his gun belt and hung it over a nail in the

wall. Her eyes stayed on the gun as Mullen turned to look at her.

"Today's the day," Mullen said, impatience in his voice. "What's the verdict, sister?" His black eyes roved the girl's trim length, from her dark-brown hair to her silken-clad ankles.

The girl took her eyes from Mullen's gun. Her smile as she looked at the tall man, was a bit whimsical. "All right, Mullen," she said, low-voiced. "I'll play. But I'll play *my* way."

Mullen raised his bushy, black eyebrows. "Yeah?" he asked. There was a lot of sarcasm in his voice. A lot for one word to carry.

She nodded. "Yeah, Mullen, I'll play this way." She took a step forward, both hands outflung. There was appeal in her eyes. And, as she went on, her voice sank. "You get a load. You sell it. But *you* keep the money. Keep it for you—for me. Then I'll play, Mullen. I'll go somewhere else with you. Somewhere where *you* can be the big boss. We'll buy a ranch, a business, or something, away from here. I'll play that way. But I'll never be your woman here."

Motionless, rubbing his hands together in front of him, Mullen's black eyes glittered faintly. He smiled cruelly. He turned, paced back and forth across the room, glancing speculatively at the girl. Then he stopped. His eyes cleared. He smiled meaningly.

"Y' know," he whispered softly, leaning toward the girl, "I got riled when yuh first said that. But—but now, it ain't so bad." His voice sank even lower. He stepped forward, fire in the black of his eyes, he leaned forward. "Tonight," he whispered suddenly, "I'll get a load. I'll sell it, an', to hell with Francisco. We'll leave—"

THE knob in the door at the back of the room rattled. Mullen paled, sucked in his breath sharply. The door-knob rattled again. And Mullen glanced apprehensively at his gun hanging on the wall as he stepped to the door and opened it.

A mountainously big man stepped into the room. He was a Mexican, huge head topping massive shoulders. And through puffy lids, his eyes beady black, he peered piggishly at Mullen.

"Mullen," he said in excellent English. "Come in here. I want to talk to you." His huge jowls quivered as he talked.

Mullen nodded, glanced again at his gun hanging on the wall, then followed the big Mexican through the door, and closed it.

"All right, Francisco," he said, respect in his tone.

Francisco smiled queerly at Mullen. As he did, the fat in his round face wrinkled into greasy lines. Mullen looked at his beady eyes, then rubbed the side of his own face with the palm of his hand.

"All right, Francisco," he said again, nervously.

Without a word, Francisco turned and opened another door. It led to a small room in which there was a table. Standing in the doorway he motioned to Mullen.

Mullen stepped to his side, gasped and shoved his way into the room. On the table lay a dead man. It was Poggin, the man the Kid had killed in the street.

Francisco smiled again at the question in Mullen's eyes. "He talked before he died, Mullen," he said. "He told me things that proves you're a fool. He told me things that proves we're all fools."

Mullen's face paled as he watched the big man pace back and forth. And his right hand rubbed against his holsterless right leg.

Francisco shook his big head angrily. "You," he said suddenly. "You're the biggest fool of the lot." He raised his huge paw and waved it toward the door leading to the room where Mullen had just left the girl. "Her," he said, "know who she is? Frank Richie's sister! Richie, the Customs man you killed. And you're sweet on his sister!"

Mullen cursed softly. Francisco smiled again.

"And the Kid," he went on, "Kid Barlow. He killed Poggin. Poggin had something on him, too. I don't know what. Poggin died before he could tell all of it. But the Kid is up to something. He's got to go. The girl's got to go."

Francisco stopped and shrugged one huge shoulder. Muttering under his breath, Mullen started toward the door. Francisco threw out a big arm, stayed him.

"I'll fix the Kid," he said, "you fix the

girl. Get her away from here, and do it now. And Mullen—no mistakes."

Lips curling downward, Mullen shook his head nervously. On the swart of his skin, the lines about his mouth showed dark as ink.

"Hell, no," he grated venomously, "no mistakes. I know how to fix *that* filly." There was a load of hate in his voice.

Mullen went out the door, strode through the other room and entered the room where he had left the girl. Indecision flew into the blue of the girl's eyes as she watched him slap his gun belt about the waist again. He took the gun from its holster and opened the loading-gate with his thumb. The bright brass of shells looked up at him from the cylinders. Mullen sighed, seemed relieved.

"Honeybunch," he said looking up, "get into some ridin' togs, right pronto. I got a load to deliver. I'll sell it an' we'll go through with our little deal, right now."

Mullen watched the girl hesitate, smiled at her back as she straightened her shoulders and strode from the room.

"Like hell," he muttered to himself as she went through the door.

IN through the front door of the Cantina the Kid eased, stepped to one side and watched the "Private" door at the other side of the room. It was closed. Seating himself near the door he ran his eyes along the bar, past the door behind which he thought Mullen and the girl to be. He rolled a quirley slowly, while his eyes roved the rest of the room. Striking a match with his thumb nail, he lit the cigaret. The door marked "Private" swung open.

Exhaling slowly, smoke curling lazily from his partly open mouth, the Kid watched Mullen and the girl step through the door and come across the room. Her eyes, looking straight ahead, had indecision in them as she strode past the Kid. The girl in front, Mullen behind, they walked purposefully. The Kid's eyes slitted. Fire flecked their slate-gray depths. There seemed to be hatred in Mullen's black eyes as he watched the girl's back.

Directly behind Mullen and the girl, five men came through the door. They were Francisco's men. The Kid watched them. With apparent carelessness they sauntered across the room. Two of them stopped at the door. One went to the middle of the bar. Another to the far end of the room. And the fifth across the hall directly opposite the Kid.

Kid Barlow puffed again on his cigaret, while he felt the eyes of all five of Francisco's men on him. Rising to his feet, he looked at the door. The two men there stared at him expressionlessly. One was a Mexican. He grinned like a cat, his white teeth showing contrastingly against the swarthiness of his skin.

The Kid's eyes went to the one at the bar. He, too, stared at the Kid. And the others—they, too. They had him. With a careless flip, the Kid tossed his half-smoked cigaret away. A dance-hall girl started across the floor, stopped, looked at all five of Francisco's men, turned her eyes directly on the Kid, then almost ran from the room.

Francisco, almost filling the aperture, stood in the office doorway. His teeth showed, too, as he smiled at Kid Barlow.

Suddenly, like a mountain cat streaking into action, the Kid moved. Twin streaks of light, his guns came out. They spat—three times. The three lights in the long hall crashed to bits. One, flaming like a falling plummet, crashed to the floor. And the flames danced weirdly, showed the quivering figures of scurrying men in a halo of red, as shots crashed out through the room.

Women screamed. Like lances of red, painted momentarily on a background of smoke swirled black, the fire of guns licked out, then died. Men yelled hoarsely—jamming, crowding, stomping, trampling each other in a mad scramble. The room cleared.

Fighting in the press of the crowd, Kid Barlow, a gun in each hand, fought toward the door. The thunderous voice of Francisco roared above the yells of the crowd, cursing in Spanish, instructing in English. The flames from the spilled lamp mounted higher, roared in the center of the room.

Cursing, a Francisco gunman sighted the Kid, raised his gun. The Kid's own flashed. And the gunman died, blood from his chest spurting on a dance-hall girl's shoulder. She screamed, cursed the Kid, and fought wildly toward the door.

A mountainous form blocked the Kid's path at the Cantina entrance. Francisco! His hand swept up, a glittering blade in it. It flashed down. The Kid grunted with pain as his guns blazed again. Francisco, big face convulsed, fell forward against the press of the crowd. They carried him, dead, out into the street.

Outside, staggering, the Kid wrenched at the knife blade in his shoulder. He threw it from him. The flames from the interior of Francisco's Cantina lighted the street with a flickering reddish haze. Out of it, into the darkness of a sheltering building, the Kid ran between two buildings, and to the strange calmness of another street.

At a stable in the rear of the Cantina, he leaped on the back of his already saddled bronc. The shots dimmed behind him. The red haze in the sky mounted higher. The shots ceased altogether. And the Kid pounded his way to the edge of Ojenaga.

Why was Mullen taking the girl out of Francisco's? For safety? Hardly. The Kid sank spurs to his bronc. He left the town behind him, rode madly toward the river. A woman's scream sounded ahead of him, high-pitched, piercing. Three shots crashed above the pound of the Kid's bronc's hoofs. Cursing bitterly, the Kid shoved in the hooks and raced on.

OUT of the front doors of the Cantina, up the street and to a dark cove-like room at the rear of the Cantina, Mullen led the girl. He knocked on a boarded door, and a panel slid open.

Yellow, dried and parchment-like skin about his wrinkling eyes, a Chinaman behind the door, nodded wisely at Mullen. Muttering in a singsong voice, he slid a flat package through the aperture. It was wrapped in gray, oil-proofed silk. And the girl's eyes hardened as she saw it.

Wordlessly, Madero Mullen stuck the package beneath his black silk shirt. He motioned and, followed by the girl, he strode along a narrow, evil-smelling street that was dark and filled with the whisper of sandaled feet. Coming to the door of a stable, they mounted their broncs, and rode unhurriedly toward the silver ribbon of river separating Mexico from *Los Estados Unidos.*

Evilly, flame in his jet-black eyes, Madero Mullen smiled as he watched the trail ahead of them. The girl, straight-backed, eyes brooding and uncertain, twisted her lips into a jagged smile as a light blinked momentarily on the U. S. shore opposite to where she and Mullen rode.

"Me," she asked Mullen, low-voiced, "I'm going over with you?"

Satirically, Mullen chuckled. Like discolored yellow ivory his teeth showed in the moonlight.

"No," he said, mock concern in his deep-voiced tones, "I don't reckon yuh'll be goin' over with me."

Sharply, the girl looked at him. She didn't say anything.

Faint but sharp, from the town behind them, came the sound of shots. Mullen turned, looked back, then grinned as he watched the trail ahead again. The girl watched him, puzzlement in her eyes.

"Shots," she finally said. There was alarm in her voice.

Seemingly sarcastic, that deep-throated sound came from Mullen's lips again. "Uh-huh," he breathed. "A—a—friend of ours is takin' a little trip."

Involuntarily, the girl gasped. Then she looked blandly at Mullen. "A trip?" she asked casually. "Who's taking a trip Mullen? And where?"

THE shots from town roared into a crescendo of sound. Then they died. A red haze lit the sky. Mullen looked over his shoulder, and cursed.

"The Kid," he spat suddenly, "he's takin' a trip. A trip to hell. Where *yuh're* goin'—Miss Richie!"

The girl raised her hands to her throat. Her breath sounded shrilly in the silence as their broncs stopped. Mullen took his gun from its holster. As though fascinated, the girl's eyes followed his movements. He showed dark, dim, unreal in the eerie light of the moon.

"No," she breathed gaspingly. "No," Mullen, you're not—"

Mullen cursed again. His gun swept up. Once—twice—three times he thumbed the heavy hammer. The girl screamed. Three booming shots roared in the stillness of the night. Whimpering, swaying, slipping limply from her saddle, the girl

fell to the ground. Mullen cursed again as he watched her for a moment.

Then he shoved viciously at his gun as he pushed it into the holster again. He dismounted, took off his vest and hat. He rolled the vest into a ball. With a string, he tied the hat to the rolled up vest and lashed the whole thing to the pommel of his saddle. Then he mounted, urged his bronc into the muddy waters of the Rio Grande. Splashing, the horse quickly made its way to deep water. Mullen eased off its back. He slapped the bronc on the rump and the animal swam toward the other shore. The hat tied to its saddle looked very much like a man swimming beside his mount.

Mullen, swimming silently, watched it. He grinned.

"All right, John Laws," he muttered, "capture *that*."

The sound of furious hoofbeats came from the Mexican side. They stopped. Mullen, deep in the sluggish water, listened, heard the hoofbeats start again, and fade in the distance.

Was that the Kid—escaped from Francisco? Or Francisco's men?

Then Mullen dived, swam silently toward the distant shore. Mullen had the dope. He'd sell it. Keep the money. That girl—she didn't have such bad ideas at that. Mullen grinned, while downriver his horse snorted, splashed, and presented a good target as it neared the shore.

BLOOD dripping from his wounded shoulder, racing his bronc forward, Kid Barlow reached the end of the low, wooden bridge spanning the Rio Grande. Momentarily he hesitated at its end. Then he raced his bronc forward again, pounding his way upward above the bridge. He splashed into the river, made his way midstream. Who had fired the shots he had heard? Mullen? At the girl? Who was she? Again, the Kid took the wadded paper from his pocket.

Madero Mullen killed Frank Richie.

Who was interested in wanting Kid Barlow to think that?

Smiling, jaggedly, he let the paper loose from his hand, and while his bronc swam the few feet of deep water in the river, watched it float away. His horse's feet touched ground again, splashed to the shore. The Kid groaned as his shoulder throbbed, pained him.

Silvery, rippling into a broken sheen of shining white, the moon played on the river surface. No sound broke the silence. Guns back in their holsters, the Kid sank to the shelter of a tamarac bush, and waited.

While out in the waters of the river, Madero Mullen, swimming silently, made his way shoreward. Slowly, cautiously, he inched his way toward the tamarac-lined shore.

While his beady eyes watched above and below, he took his gun from his holster. He, like the Kid, shook it, extracted the spent and unfired shells alike. From a waterproof bag under his shirt he extracted five cartridges for his gun and loaded it.

He grinned again as he patted the bulge under his shirt. Dope. Dope worth plenty of money. And that note. Someone was above him on the river. Mullen would go down.

Hiding in the tamarac, the Kid jerked to attention as he heard a muttered exclamation from out on the river surface. Swiftly but silently, he eased his guns from their holsters. Silence again. The Kid's eyes swept sluggish water. It was unbroken. Then—

Below him a form broke the surface. A head that was motionless for a time. Then head and shoulders. The upper part of a man emerged from the water. At the river's edge the form stopped, took a gun from its holster. The Kid eased forward, crept silently through the stiff-stemmed tamarac.

AS he went forward, he watched the river edge. He muttered softly, cursed to himself as he lost sight of his man. Then a startled gasp in front of him. A muttered exclamation. The Kid leaped forward. He broke the bushes, saw Mullen leaning forward, a snarl on his heavy features, pointing his gun at the girl of the Cantina. The girl who had left in company with Mullen. His finger was trembling eagerly over the trigger.

The Kid moved like lightning. His guns jerked in his hands. Flame leaped out to scorch Mullen and to knock the dark-faced, dripping smuggler forward,

simultaneous with the flash of his own gun.

Back of the Kid the bushes broke again. Freeman, gun in hand. Parsons, face filled with hate, eying Mullen on the ground while his gun trained on the Kid. Freeman smiled at the girl, looked from her to the Kid and back again.

"Well," he sighed, "he's got 'em at last." There was relief in his tone.

"At last," said the girl.

"Miss Hazel Richie," Freeman said gesturing toward the girl, and looking at Parsons and the kid. "Frank's sister." He sighed, shrugged, "She just would," he said resignedly.

"She helped," said the Kid, "a lot. But I thought Mullen had killed her."

He winced with the pain of his wounded shoulder as he thrust his hand into his pocket. Producing a badge, he pinned it on his wet shirt front. He smiled jaggedly down at Mullen as he did it.

Parsons, puzzlement in his eyes, stared from the girl to the Kid. The girl stepped to the Kid's side.

"Mullen tried to kill me," she said smiling, "but I put blanks in his gun when he went in to talk to Francisco. And after he shot me with the blanks, I swam my horse over and got Mister Freeman." She smiled at the Kid. "And I suspected you were you," she went on softly. "Frank has described you. But even though I wasn't sure I put a note in your pocket telling you who killed Frank."

She placed a hand on the Kid's arm. "Thank you," she started. Then—"Why—why you're wounded. Mullen said you were taking a trip. He said—"

The Kid grinned. "Uh-huh," he breathed. "But Mullen didn't connect. An' he had real bullets in his gun this time. I saw him reload when he came outa the river. An' Francisco—he took a trip instead o' me. Him an' about four o' his gun slicks. An' Francisco's place is burned down. I don't think we'll be bothered from that quarter for a while."

"Your shoulder," insisted the girl. "I want to take care of it."

Winking at Freeman, the Kid shook his head. "It's awful sore," he said seriously. "It'll take a lot o' care."

FREEMAN, eyes twinkling, watched Parsons as the Kid let the girl lead him toward the yellow light blinking in the Customs House, upriver.

"There," he said. "Mullen's got. Francisco's gone. His place is burned. An' his gun slicks blowed apart. An' that's the gent yuh called a yella skunk not later than this afternoon."

"The badge," Parsons muttered, puzzled, as he watched the Kid's back. "He's a Customs man. An' he went into Mexico. That ain't—"

"Mexico? Mexico?" Old Freeman snorted. "Who said anything about Mexico? That young fella is Kid Barlow, a pal o' Frank Richie's. When Frank got killed he came up here from El Paso on leave o' absence. Mullen didn't know him so we—ah—well, the Kid just sits down here on good ol' U. S. soil an' waits for a smuggler to come along. Pretty soon a gent waltzes past. He *happens* to be the gent that killed the Kid's pal, an' he *happened* to have some dope on him. So the Kid just nabs him. That's th' way it happened. Leaves o' absence don't affect a gent's duty when he sees it."

Freeman spat on the ground. "Quite simple, Parsons," he finished. "But that's the way it all happened."

"But Francisco dead, his gun slicks blowed apart, his place burned down—how'll we explain?"

"Francisco shot hisself. His gun slicks got into a ruckus among theirselves as far as we know. An' a bolt o' lightnin' hit Francisco's joint." Old Freeman sighed, "Which," he added piously, "as far as I know, is the absolute truth, an' I'll swear to it."

"On our words of honor as officers an' gentlemen," said Parsons. "I was right here beside him all the time, an' I know he never stepped a foot off o' U. S. soil."

But up the trail apiece, the Kid and a bright-eyed girl didn't care very much how a case was going to be explained to the "higher ups." They cared only that Kid Barlow had intrigued his way into Mullen's gang. He'd avenged the death of a pal and brother. And right now—well—they didn't seem to care a great deal about even that.

HALO FOR A HOLSTER-HOPPER

By Bart Cassidy

Jim Monis and his frail wife prayed for a miracle to save Doom Ranch. And they found it in the trigger finger of Missouri Mike—the singing saddlebum.

A LONE drifter was walking a dejected-looking horse across the floor of the valley. His bandanna was pulled up around his neck where the sun was trying to raise blisters. A cloud of dust eddied up from the horse's hoofs, and was slowly wafted away by a light breeze. The drifter was singing:

"Bury me not on the lone pra-ai-ree-ee,
Where the wild coyote will howl o'er me-ee,
Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the wind
blows free;
Bury me not on th—"

The cowboy's song ended abruptly as the distant report of a pistol rang out.

Turning quickly in the direction from whence the report had come, the cowboy stared in wild amazement. A mile to the north two riders were plunging over the ridge.

At the second report the fleeing rider threw his hands high in the air and pitched to the ground. His assailant advanced with leveled gun.

Mike Maguire, the lone cowboy, drew his own gun and fired into the air. At the report the pursuer wheeled his horse and plunged over the ridge to the southward.

Maguire touched spurs to his piebald mount and headed for the fallen man. As he reached the crest of the ridge, the fleeing gunman was emerging from the placid waters of the Rio Grande, a mile away, on the Mexican side.

Reaching the wounded man, the cowboy dropped beside him and, examining the limp form, saw that he was wounded in the shoulder and bleeding profusely.

"Bored plumb through," he soliloquized. "Lucky it wasn't a few inches lower. May get you anyhow," the cowboy continued. "Must be a cowhand, from his outfit," was his half-spoken thought.

For if Mike Maguire had a thought while alone it was sure to be put into a jumbled murmur, which seemed to serve as company on his lonely travels.

Maguire was a wanderer. He had never been known to spend more than one season in a place or with one outfit. His feet always got to itching, and without word or plea he would ride out over the wide-open ranges as free and unfettered as the birds and wild things. It was the range drifter's way.

That, to Maguire, was life. Wandering, roaming. Not exactly searching for something but just going somewhere, as he had done while a small boy from his Missouri home.

In age he was in the middle twenties. Tall and angular, with a boyish face, from which shone mild blue eyes, while from under his Stetson sombrero curled a mass of dark brown hair. He wore the full cowboy regalia of high-heeled boots, white chaps, blue and white checkered shirt and a long kerchief fastened in front by a ring carved from a cow horn.

Tearing the wounded man's shirt into strips, he bound up the ugly wound and bathed his face with water from his canteen while watching him slowly show signs of regaining consciousness.

Gathering the man in his arms, Maguire laid him across his horse. The movement caused a painful revival of the wounded man. He opened his eyes, stared wildly about and with a belligerent struggle crumpled to the ground.

"Don't get excited, partner, the feller what plugged you stampeded like a scairt coyote," Maguire exclaimed.

"Where'd—who are you?"

"Me? Oh, don't bother about me. You're the one that needs fixin' up. Where do you belong?"

The wounded man groaned.

"Over there!"

And he pointed weakly to the northwest.

"Kinda had you goin', didn't he?" Maguire asked as he helped him to his feet.

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A rearing horse charged directly at Maguire.

"Yes—emptied my gun—at 'em—an' had to run fer it."

"At 'em? I saw only one."

"The gang had turned back."

The words to Maguire bespoke cattle rustling and other deeds of outlawry, and that the wounded man was a victim of their raids.

"Yes, they—"

"Don't talk any more, buddy, you got a bad hole there, an' it needs attention. Here, hold onto my shoulder while I help you up."

TAKING the reins of the suffering man's horse, Maguire led the way pointed out, and after an hour of painful traveling, a ranch house was sighted in a small draw heading an arroyo, which became quite rugged and rocky as it neared the Rio Grande a few miles to the south.

As they drew up at the hitch rack, a young woman rushed out to meet them.

"Jim! Jim! What happened? Are you bad hurt?" she cried, as she noted the slumping figure of her husband.

"Shoulder's all. Not much. Be a' right

in a little while. Just—" and the wounded man winced under the pain as he was helped to the ground.

"Here, lady, put his arm around your neck like this, and we'll get him in all right. He'll be—be better in a while," Maguire ordered, and the two half carried the weakening man inside.

As they laid him across a bed, his eyes stared wildly, then closed as he sank into unconsciousness.

"Jim! Jim Morris!"

The excited little woman shrieked, then burying her face in the bed clothing, gave way to weeping.

Maguire doffed his wide sombrero, tugged at his shirt collar, which seemed to have suddenly become too tight, and a mist formed before his eyes. A moment he stood there, then seeing the man move, he touched the grief-stricken woman's arm and said pathetically, "Lady, he may make it all right yet. If you'll get some bandages we'll dress the wound."

Mrs. Morris straightened and brushing the tears from her cheeks, sobbed, "Then he has a chance to—to live?"

"Yes, I think so; if we get him dressed right away."

And with dexterity the big cowboy began removing the man's boots and making preparations to dress the wound. Mrs. Morris rendered useful aid in bringing whatever the cowboy ordered.

When the wound was dressed and the man placed in a comfortable position, Maguire reached for his hat.

"Guess I'll be ridin', lady. I'm goin' toward Coyote Pass, an' if they's a doctor there I'll send him out, if you want."

"I wish—wish—you didn't have to go—you see—" Her voice broke, and again she burst into tears.

Maguire stood rolling his hat in both hands. There was some reason that the sad little lady did not want him to leave.

"You and the boys can manage, don't you think?" he faltered.

"The boys—the boys! Yes, I guess so, if you must go. You've done so much already, and I surely do thank you."

"What's the matter with the boys?" he asked, sensing a note of remorse.

"The boys—! Well, you see, they don't seem to want to help much since that gang broke loose."

Maguire was listening attentively to her now.

"The foreman quit this morning," she continued. "Said he was going to work for the Box B outfit, and it's them that poor Jim thinks is causin' all the trouble. And now all the boys want to quit, too. But I—we can't blame them much."

She turned her saddened face to hide a flow of tears.

Maguire sat down, waiting for her to continue.

"It's all right, Mrs. Morris," he said with sympathy. "Tell me about it."

"Well—I can't blame them. Jim owes them two months' wages, and can't pay until he makes a shipment, but he can't drive the roundup and do the cutting without help. And besides our herds have been drove clear over the Concho range and had to be brought back."

SHE stopped as though the story was finished, but Maguire knew there was more. "Yes?" he asked. "Who drives your stock over the Concho?"

"We don't know for sure, but think it's the Box B outfit."

"Couldn't your foreman find out?"

"Said he thought it best not to accuse anyone. Barnes was a good foreman until Biglow bought the Box B outfit, and since then he's been threatening to quit every week, until Jim told him to go on. Poor Jim—he—had to borrow more money to pay him off."

"Who's Biglow, now?"

"He's an overbearin' man that owns the Box B. Spends most of his time in El Paso or across the river. And—" she leaned a little closer, glancing hurriedly out the door as if fearing an eavesdropper—"and it's been said that he don't always ship his own brand."

Maguire breathed deeply, his fists clenching as a strange light flashed from his eyes.

"Mr. Sims," Mrs. Morris continued, "has been good to Jim, though. Letting him have more money when the mortgage was too much already, he said—"

"Sims?" And the big cowboy looked askance.

"Oh, Mr. Sims! He owns houses and lots in Coyote Pass. Buys cattle and lends money sometimes. Has plenty of it, too."

"Uh-huh," the cowboy grunted and sat

for several minutes rubbing his chin in thoughtful silence.

Then, rising suddenly, he walked with quick steps to the wounded man's bedside. Taking one of the limp hands lying on the covers, he looked down into the careworn face of the young rancher.

"Jim Morris!" he said, "we don't know each other very well—yet; but it 'pears to me that you're needin' help right smart, an' I guess this is a good place to hang my hat."

Then, turning to Mrs. Morris, he continued in a calm, firm manner, "Lady, I'm goin' to look around this outfit while Jim's out of it. I always wanted to see fair play, an' there surely is a whole lot of it missin' hereabout, an' besides—"

"But we can't pay you—can't afford to hire any more hands now," the surprised woman faltered.

"We'll talk about that later. Of course I can't go to work 'thout your permission, but you need someone powerful bad, an' I think I'm the chap you're lookin' fer."

"Well, Mr.—Mr.—" she faltered.

"Mike. Mike Maguire. I happen to hail from Missouri, an' I've got a powerful lot o' curiosity."

"Well, Mike, I don't know what Jim'll say, but as he and I have always played partners, I guess it will be all right. We do need you—someone. I'll tell the boys."

"I'll tell 'em—when they come in."

And the big cowboy strode from the house.

After putting the two horses in the corral, Maguire untied a small package, containing his entire wardrobe, from his saddle and made his way to the bunkhouse.

Here he washed up, brushed the dust from his checkered shirt and worn chaps, and was busily engaged in cleaning his six-gun when the door was darkened and four cowboys crowded into the room. They stopped, as one, at sight of the stranger.

MAGUIRE rose to his feet, and after dropping the cartridges into the cylinder and holstering the big gun, faced the quartet.

"Howdy!" he called glibly.

"Howdy," came from the one in front, while the others merely grunted.

"Who might yo' be?" the leader demanded.

"Might be Brigham Young, but I ain't!" he answered laconically. "Name's Mike Maguire."

"What's yore business here?" the man came back, ignoring Maguire's attempt at an introduction.

"Gonna run this shebang till Jim gets able, I reckon. Guess you heard about him gettin' plugged?"

"Yeah. Heard it in town. So you're gonna run the outfit, eh?"

"In town?" Maguire repeated, disregarding the last question. "Whatin'ell you doin' in town? Thought you was ridin' this ranch?"

"What's that yore damn business?" the leader sneered.

"It'll be some o' my business—from here on—"

"Say, partner," the other stormed, advancing menacingly, "I'll give you two minutes to clear out. By gad, you can't come out here a-tellin' us what to do. Clear out or I'll—"

Maguire stood facing him, his steel blue eyes dancing as if enjoying a joke.

"Tell me when the two minutes is up. You're gettin' kinda interestin'," he bantered.

"Get him, Sol," came from one of the others.

"My two minutes is up," the self-appointed foreman drawled. "An' now I'm a-tellin' you to get, only I'm givin' you just two seconds."

Sol snarled and braced himself, but not soon enough. A hardened fist shot out and the surprised man staggered backward from a stinging blow on the chin. Like a flash Maguire followed up, raining a shower of blows on his adversary's face and body.

As Maguire straightened from his attack, a smashing blow on the head, from one of the others, sent him to the floor. Blood spurted from an ugly gash in the side of his head, but Sol had hit the floor and was out of it, for the time being at least. As Maguire floundered about, his vision cleared. Above him stood the threatening cowboy, his gun poised for another blow.

Realizing the situation at a glance, Maguire rolled, apparently groggy, to hands and knees, then with a lightning-like movement grabbed the unsuspecting cowboy's

legs, bringing him down with a thud. In a flash Maguire was upon him, his fists smashing sledge-hammer blows into the other's face. The man sank back and slumped limply to the floor.

Sol, regaining his senses, attempted to rise to his feet. A smashing blow from Maguire, without rising from his kneeling position, sent the bully down again and out for the count.

Maguire sprang to his feet, and charging the other two, bellowed, "Come on, you curs, if you want to come in on this!"

But they backed away. Then, after an awkward pause, one of them found voice.

"Not us," he answered for both. "We ain't hankerin' fer no trouble with you. If you're gonna be the new range boss we're fer you. An' we're not yaller neither, Dude an' I ain't. You're just the kind o' man this outfit needs. Dude an' I like it here, if it wasn't fer Sol an' Barnes, but it sort of seems—"

"Yeah. Go on," Maguire was looking them over inch by inch.

"Tell you all about it later," the speaker finished, indicating by a nod that the two were regaining consciousness.

"O.K.," said Maguire.

AS the vanquished bullies arose to their feet, Maguire pointed to the door, and without a word they left hurriedly.

Maguire turned to face the two remaining men. Dude advanced with outstretched hand.

"My name's D. U. Coombs. Dude fer short. An' Bill Collins there's my buddy."

"Powerful glad to know there's two he-men here, anyhow, an' I don't think I'm misplacin' my judgment," Maguire answered as he shook the proffered hand.

"No, by gad," Bill explained as he grasped the new foreman's hand with a grip that would have made a weaker man wince. "An' Jim needs us. Jim's a good feller, but this gang just had it over him. Wish he could have seen you lay them two skunks out. But say, Mike, let me fix up the head while I tell you about things."

With surprising alacrity Bill bandaged the wound, talking all the while.

He told of the Box B outfit, of Barnes and the rustling and even insinuated that Barnes had helped in driving Jim's Flying V brand from their range, and that Jim was in dire need of money. But that Sims was holding a big mortgage against the Flying V Ranch, and Biglow blocking every move of Jim's to get his beef cattle rounded up for shipment.

So what could a man do?

When he had finished, Maguire sat for a few minutes in thoughtful silence. Then, getting slowly to his feet, exclaimed, "Let's ride into town, fellers, an' peep around a little. 'Spect we'd better get a couple cow hands to help get that shipment to the railroad."

Leading the way to the corrals, Maguire selected a rangy bay, Jim's top horse, Ironsides, and quickly saddling they dashed away.

At Coyote Pass the trio dismounted and entered the Manhattan saloon and dance hall.

As they stepped to the bar Sol emerged from the crowd of cowboys and barroom loungers, and indicating Maguire by a toss of the hand said, "That's him, Barnes. That's the galoot that hit me when I wasn't lookin'."

The man addressed as Barnes advanced a step.

"Well, Sol," Barnes snarled, looking the three over, "you may let a range rat like that chase you offen your job, but I'm a-tellin' him that this place ain't big enough fer the two o' us. An' since one o' us is gonna leave, I advise Mr. Missouri Mike that he'd better be travelin'."

A loud guffaw from the crowd greeted the remark.

MAGUIRE looked the big man over from head to foot. Barnes did not come up to his expectations. He appeared as a red-eyed ruffian, with a mass of matted black hair falling about his low forehead, while his distorted face was augmented by a bushy mustache.

A faint smile passed over Maguire's face as his eyes fanned the crowd that had gathered about.

"Strikes me that you're powerful liberal with your advice," Maguire replied calmly. "But since I've managed to get along middlin' like without it, I can't see where I'm hankerin' fer it just now."

Barnes moved a step closer, his hand moving slowly toward the butt of a six-gun at his hip. His lips parted in a snarl. He

stood a moment staring at the big cowboy as the crowd moved back, for those who knew Barnes in his present mood, knew him as a dangerous man.

"Air you gonna move?" he stormed.

"Yeah. If you move your hand a bit closer to that gun."

For answer, Barnes whipped for his gun. As his hand closed about the butt a report rang out. Barnes grabbed his wrist as a howl of pain escaped him, and before he was aware of what was happening, Maguire's fist connected with his chin and he went to the floor in a heap.

As Maguire stood, his smoking gun clenched in his hand, a quick movement at his side drew his attention. He faced about as Sol's gun started from its holster. But before the gun was unsheathed, or Maguire could swing on him, a shot rang out and Sol sank to the floor. Bill sprang forward, waving his big .45.

"Whoopee!" Bill yelled. "Come on, you Box B outfit. Flyin' V's got a lead-slingin' foreman, an' a coupla cowhands that's seein' red. Come on now, you sneakin' coyotes!"

Dancing wildly about, his legs wide apart, his chaps flapping and his eyes blazing, the infuriated cowboy opened up with his six-gun. Glasses shattered to the floor, Japanese lanterns dropped from their tinseled moorings. Men scattered.

Dude stood close by, his gun covering the crowd.

That Maguire was pleased was plain to be seen from his easy manner as he holstered his gun.

"They've had enough, Bill," he drawled. "Don't seem to be much fightin' stock in 'em."

"Yo're tellin' us," Dude grinned.

As Bill cooled down and refilled the cylinder of his gun, a figure stepped from behind the bar.

"If you galoots are through, I'd like to take care of these wounded men," he said. "They're my men."

"Sure," Maguire agreed. "They need attention, an' a toy pistol to play with while they're recooperatin'."

A guffaw from a tall, lanky cowboy greeted this remark as he advanced, followed by a short, bow-legged chap.

"Some quick work," the tall one exclaimed to Maguire. "Yo're about the fastest lead-slingin' hombre I've seen in many a day. Have the drinks on me. We're strangers here lookin' fer a job with some straight-shootin' outfit. But we hearn o' this Box B outfit back down the trail. They offered to take us on, but we've never worked fer no outfit yet that's got a crooked name, an' we're gettin' too old to start now."

Maguire looked them over.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, the man who had demanded the right to care for the wounded men confronted Maguire.

"Better watch your step, feller," he flared. "You'll have to answer for this before this thing's over. This is only the first round. I'm Biglow of the Box B, an' I never forget."

A roar of laughter from the tall stranger answered the remark.

"Trot along, now," the short one chided, "and take care o' your renegades."

Biglow glared in rage, but turned and calling several of his men, led Barnes and carried Sol to the back room.

"My name's Slim Starkes," the tall one informed Maguire, "an' this is Shorty Warner."

"Where from?" Maguire asked.

"Up Pecos way—"

"Good!" Maguire ejaculated, for it was a generally conceded fact that only he-men could long remain along the Pecos.

"Looks like we might buddy up fer a spell," Maguire continued.

Then, without stopping, he told Slim and Shorty something of the affairs of the Flying V, Jim Morris' condition and position and of the attempts to prevent Jim from making his shipments. When he had finished, Slim grasped his hand, his eyes flaring the fire of battle.

"We're with you, cowboy, till hell freezes over, pay er no pay. Fer if we can't get that stock to market, an' help a deservin' man when he's down, we don't need no pay. I used to be a deppity up Pecos way, an' it shore does me proud to corral a gang that's tryin' to prod a real cowman offen his right."

"Well, that's what we got ahead o' us," Maguire answered. "Lay in a supply o' tobacco, Slim, you and Shorty, an' let's get goin'."

AT the Flying V next morning, Maguire sought Jim, who was able to talk with an effort, and omitting the greater part of the saloon fight, Maguire told him all that had happened, and asked just what kind of stock was to be cut for the shipment, how many and other full details.

An hour later Maguire led the way across the ridge to the south, followed by the hardy cowboys.

When Maguire had left, Jim turned to his wife, and taking her hand in one of his great calloused paws, said with pathos, "Margaret, maybe Mike is what you call a Godsend—an answer to your prayers fer a way out. Maybe he's the way."

Mrs. Morris turned her face to hide a tear of joy at the prospective thoughts that traversed her mind.

"Yes, Jim, it's bad that you should have to be shot, but if we can market that shipment, then we can pay a part of the mortgage and you can make the improvements you want so bad—"

"Yes, and you can go home on that visit you've had planned fer these five years, an' can have them dresses like you want."

As she went about her work, and the added burden of taking care of Jim, a song burst from the lips of the fighting little woman.

As the boys were returning on the fourth day out, they came upon a stretch of fence that had been cut between every post.

Maguire viewed the devastation with narrowed eyes, the muscles of his jaws working convulsively.

"Boys!" he said at last. "Here's where hell begins to pop."

"Let 'er pop!" came from Bill and Slim in unison, while the other two let out a whoop of acquiescence.

After discussing the situation, Slim and Shorty were left to guard the gap in the fence while Maguire led the way back to the bunkhouse.

Next morning Maguire instructed the boys to go ahead with the cutting as he had some business with Jim. Mrs. Morris was in her latest high-spirited mood, while Jim was able to sit propped up in bed. A general discussion of the plan of procedure was under way when a rider dismounted at the gate and came hurriedly through the yard.

Mrs. Morris hastened to the door to meet him.

"Good morning, Mr. Sims."

Sims stepped abruptly through the door, and without taking the proffered chair, spoke with a trace of irony:

"Jim, sorry you're all shot up, but maybe you'll drag through."

"Feeling very well this morning, Mr. Sims," Jim answered, his joy at his well-being overcoming the sting of sarcasm.

"Glad you called. We're about to get a shipment ready, with the help of our new foreman."

"Yes, I've heard of him," interrupted Sims without even glancing in the direction of the foreman.

"But, Jim," he continued, "what I come to see you about is that I've got to have my money. Got a deal to cover and can't wait on your shipment. I've brought papers for you to sign, then it will be easy for me to turn them into cash. Biglow will take—"

The mention of Biglow's name was like fire to tinder. A flush passed over Jim's face. Mrs. Morris gasped. Maguire's eyes flashed like burning coals of fire.

"But, Mr. Sims—I—can't," Jim faltered.

"Got to do it! I've got the papers here," and Sims advanced a step, drawing a bundle of papers from his pocket.

The wounded man raised himself on one elbow, then sank back with a groan. Tears started from Mrs. Morris' eyes, while the expression of her face changed from one of admiration and respect to one of anger and hatred.

Maguire sprang to his feet and snatched at the paper.

"Sims," he cried, "can't you see the condition this man's in? Why come here demanding payment when you know he can't meet it? It's just a hatched scheme of Biglow's and yours to get the Flyin' V—an', by gad, it don't go."

With a plunge he grasped the older man by the shoulder and turned him toward the door.

"Get out!" he commanded.

WITH a quick movement Sims whipped for his hip. Maguire, expecting such a movement, grasped the wrist in both his hands and with a forward twist of his body bent the struggling figure over. The gun dropped to the floor.

Maguire leaned farther, the arm twisted about his own. A howl of pain escaped Sims, but if Maguire heard it he gave no heed. Farther and farther he turned, and nearer and nearer to the floor the other man stooped, a cringing cry, mingled with curses, escaping his lips.

"Don't—don't, you'll break—"

"Just what I intend doin'. I'll break every bone in your crooked body—you white-livered cur," Maguire hissed.

Then, releasing the arm slightly, he allowed the writhing man to straighten.

"Now throw them papers over there and get," Maguire ordered.

For answer Sims struggled to free his aching arm, and attempted to strike out with the other.

Again Maguire turned in the twisting position, and again the man leaned forward, his face portraying his agony.

"Lay them over there," Maguire ordered.

"Turn me loose!"

"Lay them over there!" came the repeated command.

With his free hand Sims reached a second time for his pocket, then as Maguire released the pressure his left hand sought the cowboy's throat, and his fingers closed in a vise-like grip.

Maguire's eyes flared anew, and a smile—his battle smile—parted his lips. His great muscles tensed, his body lurched forward. A snap, as of a breaking twig, and Sims sank to the floor, his right arm dangling, helplessly broken as Maguire let it fall.

"Now, you double-crossin' coyote, get before I tear you apart! Your game is up, Mr. Sims. You can't work your scheme with Biglow without gettin' what's comin' to you. Mortgage or no mortgage, that stock's goin' to the market an' you can talk to Jim then. You wouldn't come here now if he was able to protect himself."

With a howl of pain and a snarl of rage, Sims staggered to his feet and plunged through the door, Maguire following him across the threshold, his arms swinging wildly, his hands working convulsively.

"Mike! Mike!"

It was Mrs. Morris who called.

"Man, what have you done? He'll do everything now to cause us trouble!"

"He's done all he can do," Maguire answered coolly.

Jim was sitting up.

"Mike, I heard from one of the boys what you done to Sol and his partner, but I didn't know you was a regular tornado. I'm sure much obliged fer what you've done, only I'm afraid the fight has just started."

"It's almost over, Jim," Maguire exclaimed.

"Them coyotes will stay their distance, an' that's just what we want."

"Mike, I'm afraid not. Oh, I wish I could go with you. Maybe you'd better leave it alone. I'll settle with Sims somehow—"

"Yes—" the words escaped Mrs. Morris, but the appealing look in her eyes held a different meaning.

At the corrals Maguire saddled Ironsides and dashed off to the south. Over ridges and across lowlands the big bay horse carried his graceful rider. At last, topping a long ridge, Maguire sighted the boys far down the opposite slant. Grazing contentedly and undisturbed was a herd, a train load, of choice steers bearing the Flying V brand.

As Maguire rode to them, Bill advanced to meet him.

"How's things, Bill?" Maguire called.

"Fit as a fiddle!"

"Well, we start on the west trail in the morning," Maguire said as the others joined them.

"I'll ride in an' get the chuck wagon to meet us at Lone Wolf water hole at sunup. We can make the yards at Pyote by the day after tomorrow."

And mounting he rode off, as a wild whoop from the cowboys, voicing approval of his oath, echoed across the draw.

Maguire rejoined the boys just as a crescent moon was rising over the horizon. After a hasty lunch of sandwiches and steaming coffee, they began riding around the herd.

After several half circuits the mass began moving to the westward, but not until they were moving at an even gait, did Maguire crowd them. For the starting of a large herd requires patience.

FOR two hours they traveled, and were nearing the Lone Wolf water hole, when Maguire noticed that the mass began wavering to the southward. Calling the

boys to him, he mentioned the break in the course.

"I've been expectin' something, an' maybe this is it," he exclaimed.

"Slim, let's ride around that way, while you boys bring 'em on. Now don't hesitate to stop anything that comes your way, an' if you shoot, shoot straight an' fast."

Skirting the herd at a short distance, the big foreman slowed down as they rode into a draw. Here the cattle had become scattered, allowing the two riders to pass among them. As they crossed the draw and started up the opposite incline, Maguire saw, off to the northwest, several figures silhouetted against the dim skyline.

"The Box B outfit, shorer than hell."

Carefully they rode nearer the milling horsemen.

"We'll try to get their first move," Maguire advised. "Let's get down and crawl closer so we can get a good start."

As they left their horses and crawled up the slope, voices came from the group.

"Get ready now."

Maguire recognized the voice of Barnes.

"Get that brush ready, an' when I shoot into 'em, throw the gasoline on an' let 'er go, then everybody shoot into the herd, but save a shot for them lousy galoots behind."

"Yeah," came the answer.

"Slim," Maguire whispered, "them dirty coyotes is plannin' on stampedin' the herd from this direction, an' they'll wind up in the mornin' on Box B soil or across the Rio Grande, what's left o' them. When they light their fire that'll give us a chance to pot 'em in the light, an' draw their fire this way so they can't shoot into the herd. You know, one snort o' blood an' they're gone."

"I wasn't born yesterday," Slim answered impatiently.

"When they light their fires," Maguire continued, ignoring Slim's rebuke, "then shoot an' run a few feet an' shoot again. That'll protect us an' make them think they's a dozen o' us."

But scarcely had he gone fifty yards, when a report rang out and a flare lighted the ridge.

At the first flash the crack of a .45 sounded at Maguire's left and the Mexican pitched forward.

Instantly a half dozen guns spoke and bullets whistled through the air in the neighborhood of the flash from Slim's gun.

A figure standing a short distance from Maguire peered into the darkness. Maguire's gun spoke and the man dropped.

His shot brought a volley in his direction, but as he was fifty feet away, he smiled at his safety. By the flashes he could discern the figures. His and Slim's guns barked simultaneously and two more horses dashed off riderless. Maguire plunged forward only to meet a rearing horse charging directly at him. He fired point-blank at the rider, but missed. Another figure appeared at his right.

The flare of his gun had revealed his location and like dashes of lightning the flares from the rustlers' guns lighted up the ground. Maguire sprang from side to side. One of the horses fell at his next shot, then his gun snapped—empty.

The horseless rider plunged for Maguire and together they went to the ground. Over and over they rolled, Maguire holding the man's gun hand. Then as he came on bottom his grip was loosened on the wrist—a flash and a hot, piercing pain struck his shoulder.

His antagonist thrust the muzzle of his pistol against his side. He shuddered at the thought of another bullet passing through him, but with one arm completely useless he was powerless to help himself. It seemed an age that he waited for the report and the pain that was sure to follow. Then—a click. Another gun had gone empty.

CLUBBING the heavy weapon, his adversary raised his arm for a blow. Maguire's fist shot upward with a desperate effort, landing squarely on the protruding jaw. The head went back, and with a grip of steel, Maguire's fingers, of his one good hand, closed about the hairy throat.

Forms flitted about him, guns flashed, men yelled, but tighter and tighter Maquire gripped until the struggling ceased and the head drooped.

A wild "whoopee" rose above the crack of guns as Bill, Dude and Shorty plunged into the thickest of the fight.

"Come on, you Box B outfit."

"Come on, you white-livered coyotes. Didn't we tell you to come a-shootin'? Hey, Mike," Bill called.

"Here," Maguire answered.

Bill jumped to him. The firing had ceased and not a Box B man was in sight.

"By gad, boys, he's hit," Bill yelled.

"Just a shoulder scratch," Maguire answered.

A few feet away they found Slim and a 'breed, their arms and legs locked together until it was impossible for either to reach a gun or knife.

"Untangle us, here," Slim roared.

With a small amount of resistance the Mexican was tied and Slim got to his feet, shaking himself.

After building a few fires for light, they found scattered dead, or wounded, the bold gang that had, only so short a time before, rode out on their bloodthirsty mission.

The man who had plugged Maguire proved to be Barnes, who was now able to sit up, his previously wounded hand being the reason that Maguire had been able to overpower him with one of his own arms helplessly wounded.

"We'll stay right here, boys, 'til daylight," Maguire exclaimed. "That herd didn't stampede after all an' won't go far. We'd only make 'em worse tryin' to round 'em up tonight."

"That's right," Slim said.

"Didn't scatter much neither," Dude informed them. "Was most all past before the shootin' started, an', I reckon, none o' them was hit. They'll stop in an hour."

It was a motley group that greeted the welcome daylight. Some of the Box B gang had been killed outright, while the others were helplessly wounded or securely tied.

Glancing out over the range to the southeast, Maguire turned a half smiling face to his companions. "They're all right fer today, boys. We've got some real important business ahead o' us. Remember there's two more skunks in town that need the brand o' the Flying V put on 'em. Let's clean the den out while we're at it."

"Come on, cowboy," Slim yelled, followed by a jubilant chorus from the others.

* * *

A week later a group of persons stood about the dooryard of the Flying V ranch house watching a lone figure, one arm bound in a sling, ride over the ridge into the face of the dying sun. He was riding a handsome rangy bay, and leading a piebald pony. Rhythmical squeaks came from a new silver-mounted saddle, Jim Morris' present, and one of his pockets bulged with a roll of bills, the proceeds of his part in the Flying V roundup. There had almost been a fight about that.

"He's a prince of the range," Mrs. Morris said. No one else saw fit to add to her words. And as the group turned toward the ranch house, a faint echo drifted toward them from over the mesa:

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prai-ree-ee,
Where the wild coyotes will howl o'er me-ee—"

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THE KILL CREEK KID

By James P. Olsen

"Start your steers for the valley—and they'll sleep in hell!" Open warfare answered the sheepmen's challenge . . . and it took Whang Norton, the lone-handed referee, to stem Kill Creek's bloody tide with hot lead!

SPURTS of powder smoke hung in the damp air. From the timber on the far side of Kill Creek, hidden rifles were speaking. They were talking death language with a rapid chatter.

Steers bawled and circled back. Cursing, shouting, riders, trying to push the herd forward and wield guns at the same time, couldn't make the grade. Gradually, they gave back, leaving dead horses and steers on the open range this side of the creek. The cattlemen had tried to cross a deadline, and had failed!

The riders disappeared over a rise. Men moved about in the timber. The cattle out of the way, two men came riding back again. They waved their arms in signs of peace—and kept their hands near their guns. Two men walked forward to the flat banks of the creek. Back of them, ready rifles covered the two horsemen.

Dell Stringer and Proddy Clay stopped their horses on the bare side of the little stream. Andy Smith and Cole Rowley stood on the opposite bank, just out from the timber. For several moments, the leaders of the cowmen and the speakers for the sheepmen stared at each other.

Proddy choked down his anger. "Smith," he bawled out, "we're bringin' our beef through! You damn' woolbusters don't own the range an' we aims to use Rockin' Horse Valley! We can't graze below this time uh year or we won't have no winter range."

The lank sheepman snarled back: "We had it all settled about this range. But naw, you killin' skunks wouldn't play fair. Think you can run two-three hundred head into a canyon, kill another herder, and then drive through here, huh? To hell with you!"

"Cookin' up excuses, huh?" Dell Stringer joined in. "You know good and well we didn't drive no sheep or—"

"Shore not," Cole Rowley barked, his voice tinged with angry sarcasm. "You butchers of cowhands wouldn't kill anything, huh? You didn't kill Saylor and leave him up the crick, huh? The hell you didn't. Saylor was a good range referee. He'd straightened this out peaceful. But you didn't want that. You want war. All right, you've just had a taste. Next time, we won't hit steers and horses altogether!"

"Saylor—killed?" Proddy grunted. "Hell. Yuh ain't layin' that on the cowmen. I reckon poor Saylor went like Grimes did."

"Told you we didn't kill Grimes!" Smith danced with rage. "It's you damn' cow nurses started this. Wasn't it you that brought in them gunmen, Kezar and Sooner Snell?"

"Not till you'd started it by hirin' Lund and Xavier!" Proddy howled back. "You've done said enough. We're comin' through and headed for Rockin' Horse Valley."

"Wrong," Cole Rowley answered. "You ain't. It's us that's moving. You killed the range referees and try blaming it on us. Well, Kill Crick ain't no more deadline. We're moving sheep across the crick when we feel like it."

They stood and glared. Each man knew what it meant. Yet each man swore the other side were the killers who shot the range referees sent up to settle this dispute. Each side swore the other killed punchers or herders, sheep or beef. Each side respected the fighting ability of the other side.

Yet there was only one trail they could take, and death signposted the way. Proddy nodded to Dell Stringer. They wheeled their horses and rode away. Proddy yelled back: "Send your sheep across if you want them butchered!"

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He raised the lantern—and fired.

"Start for the Valley and you'll end in hell!" Smith yelled back.

Thus, death in the age-old form of sheep and cattle wars, again gripped that Wyoming range.

JUDGE TUCKER'S sparse gray beard waved like the agitated whiskers of a billy-goat. Another range referee killed. Sheep and cow war was raging from the Flats, toward Kill Creek and between the mountains in the sheltered Rockin' Horse Valley.

Gunmen paraded the streets of Argyle, the county seat. It was the county seat because there were only two other towns in that Wyoming county, and they could boast but ten-twelve buildings. Whereas, Argyle strutted twenty-two buildings, courthouse and jail and a Chinese laundry!

"Wasn't for my rheumatiz and my dignity of county judge in this here mis-

guided district, I'd buckle on my cutters and settle this myself!" Tucker had raged when word came in Saylor was dead. In his time, Tucker had done his share of shooting—done his share of range war work. And knew how foolish it was. Also knew how such things started easy, flamed high easier, and stopped damned hard!

Who had killed Grimes and Saylor, just when it seemed they had the range and trails allocated satisfactorily? Sheepmen or cowmen, or both? Somebody wanted war, not peace. Couldn't know who or which side did it. Couldn't haul all of them into court.

"If it don't stop, if one more referee I appoint is plugged, we'll have the governor down our necks and we'll catch hell!" Tucker raved. He banged about his private office off the old courtroom, slung an inkwell at the bailiff and flopped down in a chair. He chewed his tobacco fast. His whiskers waggled faster.

"They's one way," he told himself. "Get a referee who, now, is damn' close-branded to Satan himself, to shepherd them damn' fools! Get somebody who can whup both sides and make them love it! Hmmm. . . ."

FOUR days later, a man rode into Argyle. How many horses he had used up he never said. But he made the trip plenty fast. Judge Tucker could tell you that this lithe, lazy-acting, red-headed man always did things fast. Chances were, though, Tucker would tell you nothing, unless it was where to head in.

Fearing neither man nor devil, tough as a strip of whang leather, Whang Norton was neither cow nor sheepman. He ran a horse ranch up in Montana. Once, it was rumored he ran with the wild bunches in Wyoming and the Dakotas and Colorado. Not because he wanted to be an outlaw, but because he could think of nothing else to do at the time.

Whang had tired of that business, though. He decided this down in New Mexico, and immediately headed north once more. In Argyle, he met trouble. Trouble in the form of a town marshal who had once ridden with the wild bunches himself. Wall, the marshal, had tried to gather Whang in for a little glory.

Instead, he gathered lead from a pair of hot-snouted six-guns, and his glory consisted of a funeral attended by many drunks and some wide-eyed small boys and cur dogs. Small satisfaction to Whang, though. He was gathered in by the sheriff and landed in the county coop.

At the trial, Judge Tucker arose in the middle of testimony, and smacked an irate district attorney's hopes of another big conviction smack on the snoot.

"Wall was a wall-eyed bazzaloozum!" Tucker's whiskers waggled angrily. "It's done proved he tried to gather this here Whang gent in without reason. Maybe this Whang was a whang-doodle down south. That don't hurt us. I claim he done the town a great, civic favor, and should get free drinks. So I instruct the jury to find a verdict of not guilty."

"But, you old fo—er, your honor, may it please the court that I remind you such a thing can't be done?" from the attorney.

"No! You started to call me a old fool, and it don't please the court none a-tall. Can't be done! Hell, she is already done! I hate this business of you attorneys trying to convict good men so's you can build political records. Court's dismisssd."

Whang Norton came into the judge's chambers after it was over. "If I can ever pay yuh back, Jedge, don't fail tuh shout," he said. "Yuh mentioned uh drink. How about liftin' uh few tuhgether?"

So they drank, while Judge Tucker asked questions about old-timers of the owlhoot trail. Men he knew. Men he'd once ridden with. "Come damn' nigh ridin' that way myself," he said, mellowed by refreshment. "Sometimes, when I see what some law tries to put over, I wisht I had."

WHANG NORTON had ridden on north. Now, Whang Norton, several years later, was back in Argyle, going into the courthouse and up the stairs. He was that type. He'd told Tucker to call if he ever needed him. So, when Tucker called, Whang came.

Tucker was holding court. He was bored by having to listen to the prosecution trying to convict a homesteader of trying to steal a cross-cut saw. There was little enough evidence, but the prose-

cution cared nothing for that. It wanted convictions.

Tucker looked up and saw Whang leaning against the door of the courtroom. Lazy, red hair uncombed, grinning like a devil about to spring some surprise of misery on somebody that maybe needed it. Wham! Down whacked his honor's heavy gavel.

"She's plain as day," Tucker bawled. He pointed a finger at the scared homesteader. "Look at him. You can't tell me a bazzaloozum like him would ever be guilty of stealing nothing to work with! Case dismissed. Court dismissed. Jury dismissed. I mean—get out, all of you!"

He got off the bench and motioned to Whang to come with him into the other room.

An hour later, Whang Norton was range referee. He was the man who, Tucker figured, was close enough to Satan to shepherd the whole blood-thirsty bunch. That business settled, they had a few snorts.

Whang was thinking hard. "I know one uh them gunmen, Jedge," he said finally. "An' I think I know things. Mebbe-so I'm wrong, but I got uh plan." He explained.

"Go ahead, light your cheroots with dynamite!" Tucker grunted. "I don't doubt you've hit the trouble, all right. But hittin' her and stoppin' her—them is two different mules."

Whang allowed he could ride them both. Tucker hoped he could.

"I don't care if you don't mean it—hole up for uh week! Act like yuh aimed tuh kiss each other, an' leave th' rest tuh me!"

These had been the instructions Whang Norton had handed out to both sides. Proddy had claimed they couldn't wait. They had to move to the valley or spoil their winter range by grazing it now. The sheepmen declared they should go ahead and cross the creek while they were holding the upper hand.

"Yuh'll wait! Yuh ain't got no upper hand!" had been the snarled replies. "I don't give me uh cuss if yuh knock each other over plumb plenty, but I'm here tuh stop this. An' I will stop it, if I have tuh gun-whip all of yuh. Think I won't try?"

SO, for a week, there was armed, sullen truce. In town, Kezar and the Oklahoma gunman, Sooner Snell, snarled and threatened the gunnies of the sheep side, Lund and Xavier. The whole thing was dynamite, ready to go off. Peace, Whang knew, was not what somebody wanted. Still, the sheepmen were holding back. The cowmen, too. And he wasn't foolish enough to think it was because they were altogether afraid of the range referee.

He warned Kezar to hold his triggers, and Kezar, the one gunman Whang knew, didn't look as if he liked it.

It was raining. Whang rode toward the headwaters of Kill Creek. It was time something broke, and he hoped he'd be on hand to see what it was. He heard sheep blatting over in a little park and turned his horse that way.

Might be the sheepmen were shoving stuff down close so they could run it across? Whang wasn't forgetting what had happened to the other referees. His gun was loose when he put his horse in the creek to cross. The bank was sloping on the other side. His horse slipped on the wet clay and rock.

That was once where slips counted! A rifle cracked. A bullet wailed by, not an inch back of Whang's neck! He stiffened. A hard line around his lips, eyes glittering, he looked swiftly toward the brush. Not a sign. He was boogered, unless. . . .

Whang swayed slightly in the saddle. He gripped the horn as his horse climbed out on the bank. Slowly, he leaned outward, let go suddenly and dropped to the ground. Long, cold minutes passed. Back up in the brush, someone moved. Whang lay still. For an hour, he lay there in the drizzle. Blat of sheep and whisper of pines was all he heard. His horse cropped grass nearby.

It grew dusk. Then it was dark. Not until then did Whang move. He got up, stretched his numb limbs and paced up and down to get warmed up. He was figuring fast—what had always happened after those other referees had been shot. Sure—he had it. He mounted and rode toward the sound of sheep. Tying his horse in the brush, he crept up to the edge of the little park. A herder was

coming in from the upper end.

Whang watched while he built a fire and started his meal. He wasn't prepared, in a way, for what suddenly happened. A six-gun crashed. The herder piled down in a limp huddle beside the fire. Hell, they hadn't given the poor devil a chance! Whang crouched, carbine clutched in eager hands. Someone was coming riding from the other side of the park. Who would it be? Just for a moment, they stopped near the fire —two of them.

THEY weren't cowmen by a long shot. The two of them were Lund and Xavier, the sheepmen's gunnies. Had they fired the shot they thought had killed Whang? Had they killed the herder, working for the men who hired them? Whang wanted to make sure. He waited until they took down their ropes and started the flock of woolies toward a deep draw with steep sides that cut in toward the creek.

They were going to pile the sheep, kill them. That was what had always happened before, after they'd plugged the range referee. Tomorrow, the sheepmen would cut loose their wolf, and this time, the range would run red for sure! That is, it would have. . . .

Whang could see their dark forms in the night as they started hazing the sheep along. He cocked his rifle, held it before him and eased to the edge of the brush.

"A'right, coyotes!" he barked. "It's me, Whang Norton!"

A startled grunt and the gunmen wheeled about. "Norton, like thunder," Lund barked. "Norton's dead!"

"Like thunder, all right. But not dead. Start fannin'!" His rifle commenced chattering like mad. The pair of them spotted him now, standing over there in the dark. Spotted his gun flashes. They bent low and started riding toward him, shooting as they came.

Whang dropped his rifle. His hands gripped both his Colts. Alternate, left-hand and right-hand, he thumbed back the hammers and let them fall. It was too hot, far too hot. Xavier's horse stumbled, then went down. Xavier landed running, continued to run a few steps, then fairly leaped forward to land flat on his face.

Lund stopped shooting, hugged his mount's neck and rode like the Devil himself bobbed at his cantle. No use trying to catch him now. Whang cursed the dark that made shooting almost impossible. He walked carefully over to where Xavier lay sprawled. Xavier wouldn't pull his guns again—ever.

Whang became conscious that his left side was stinging. He felt of it, then pulled back his shirt, chanced a match and looked. A bullet had neatly nicked his ribs and tore the hide back. It was bleeding to beat the band.

"Darn skunk nearly got me," Whang grunted. "Reckon I'll finish up Kezar an' Snell tuhmorrow. Reckon Lund won't never come back. Mebbe-so Kezar an' Snell wasn't playin' this old game with them, but I bet uh stack they was."

It was a lot nearer to the cow camp, down on the flats, than it was to the cabins of any of the sheepmen. Proddy and Dell Stringer had tents pitched down there, holding the cattle up near the line so they could move on a minute's notice. So Whang turned his horse's head toward the cow camp. As he rode, he figured.

In the morning, he'd see Rowley and Smith, and explain the dead herder and get this thing ironed out before they all cut loose. What Whang Norton didn't figure was—

Lund had ridden out of the country. Lund had helled it for Andy Smith's, to tell them how the cowmen had raided the sheep camp and knocked over Xavier and the herder. The way it looked, Whang hadn't stopped a war. He had helped one along, and the only thing he stood to stop was lead.

"IT'S me, Dell." Whang struck a match and lit the lantern hanging on the front pole of the big tent. Dell and Proddy and a dozen others sat up and rubbed their eyes. Dell looked at an old Ingersoll and came out of his blankets.

"Hell, man, she's three o'clock. What's up?"

"He's bin shot!" Proddy yelled, pointing to Whang's blood-soaked shirt. "Grab your guns an' hustle. Them dam' sheepherdin'—"

"Whoa!" Whang stopped him. He looked around. There were two empty spaces in the row of blankets in the tent. Kezar and Snell weren't there. Whang jerked his head toward the empty places.

"Where's yuh gunhands?" he demanded.

Proddy frowned. "Not that's she any your business, Mister Referee," he said, bristling, "but they're out on the range, sort of lookin' after what stuff we ain't got held here on the flats."

"Yeah—an' I can see by yuh face yuh're wonderin' why they ain't back!" Whang answered, tying a strip of clean undershirt around his ribs. He grimaced as a twinge of pain shot through the wound. Then—

"Can yuh trust ever' man here? Them thet's here now?"

"Damn' tootin'! Meanin' to say, are you, them gunhands of ours ain't to be trusted? Meanin'—"

"Meanin' nawthin'," Whang growled. "I'm tellin' yuh outright." He proceded to tell them how he'd been shot at and all about it. And finished, "I'm bettin' blues tuh reds, even, yuh hear uh long tale uh woe, come daylight. Yeah, I betcha Kezar an' Lund come tailin' in, tellin' how they was beat back by somebody thet done slaughtered uh bunch uh beef!"

"You—you mean these gunmen are in together?" Dell demanded. "Each two raisin' hell with their own sides to keep this stirred up?"

"Eggzact!" Whang answered. "Yuh're payin' them high wages, ain't yuh? Well, so's th' sheepmen payin' high wages. Them sheepmen ain't wantin' this war, or they wouldn't uh waited on referee's decisions like they have."

"Well," Proddy rumbled, "we ain't keen for no war, either."

"A'right, yuh add them one an' one an' yuh git two! Hell, she's uh old stunt, fellas. I knowed Kezar's bin in on them kind uh deals afore. An' yuh notice them gunnies never shoot at each other."

"Listen!" Dell held up his hand.

Whang obeyed.

A thundering beat of hoofs on the soggy range told of the coming of many horsemen. They came on, nearer. A shot sounded and a bullet ripped through the tent. Suddenly, Whang understood.

"Gawd!" he howled. "They done found out what happened tuh them sheep an' are comin' hellin'. Listen...." The blat of sheep now filled the air. The sheepmen were coming right into the cow camp, driving their woolies with them. Cowmen were going for their guns. Someone put out the lantern. . . .

Whang grabbed it up again. It was a hell of a chance, but he had to take it. He should have gone to the sheepmen in the first place. He lighted the lantern, held it in his left hand and away from him and with his gun in the other paw, stepped out.

"Smith—Rowley!" he bellowed. "Hold up a minute. It's m—th' referee. He heard someone shout to someone else above the constant baaaa-mehhh of the sheep. Then, a shot lashed out as another man rode at him from one side. The bullet wailed between his left arm and his body as he held the lantern out.

He recognized who it was. In the dark, the white stockings and blazed face of Lund's roan shown. A rip-rip-rip of jagged flame jetted from Whang's gun. He saw Lund try to wheel—saw the horse turn, but Lund didn't make the turn. He shot out of the hull and rolled limply along the ground.

Someone among the sheepmen had opened up again. A shot came back from the tent. "Stop!" Whang shouted. He waved the lantern. "Stop, I say!"

IT held them for a moment. That was all he needed. He yelled loud and he yelled plenty and fast. Sheep were scattering, but the men had pulled up their horses. If only the cowmen would hold up and not make a hostile move.

"Look out, Smith," one of the sheepmen called. "He's likely sold out to the cow wrestlers. It's a trick. Let me have a shot at him. He plugged Lund."

"It ain't no trick, an' if yuh want tuh fight after I talk, fight an' be damned. I'll do some pluggin' myself, an' it's liable tuh be sheepherder or cowhand, 'cordin' tuh my notion," Whang snorted.

He heard Smith and Rowley talking to their men. Then, they rode forward. Whang knew that guns covered himself

and the tent. He called to Dell and Proddy and told them to come forward. Snarling, six-guns in hand, they came and stood beside him. Whang sat the lantern down.

Once more, Whang repeated the happenings of the hours since Lund or Xavier, one or the other, had taken a shot at him and figured him dead. Andy Smith hesitated. Then—

"You say that! Still, Lund and Xavier is dead. You cowhands ain't lost no hands, or gunmen."

"Don't you say that we—"

"Shut up, Proddy!" Whang roared. "I'll bend uh gun barrel on yuh knot if you don't hold yuh tongue." He turned again to the others.

"Ain't lost no gunmen — yet!" he said "But come daylight, mebbe afore, yuh'll see things. This thing's goin' tuh be stopped, an' yuh'll see me do it. I'm referee. The rest keep yuh hands off!"

Smith was backing his horse away. He was cursing a blue streak. Whang shut him up. "Git them woolies back!"

"Move them, Andy," Rowley snarled.

THEY rode around, cutting the sheep back in. Dogs barked and snapped. A few minutes more, and the blat of the flock started fading toward the creek. A dim gray line was threading along the horizon. Almost daylight.

"Watch Rowley, an' stay back," Whang said to Dell. "Here comes yuh hired hands now, an' comin', whoopin'."

"We'll handle this with you," Proddy declared. Whang eyed him coldly, anger in his eyes.

"Yuh will—like hell," he answered evenly and coldly. "Yuh couldn't handle nothin', any uh yuh. If yuh could, yuh wouldn't be fightin' like uh bunch uh damn' fools when they's plenty range. Yuh let them gunnies stir yuh up, throw mud in yuh eyes."

"Well nail them, and let the court do the rest," Dell declared.

"I said I'd tend to it!" Whang declared, getting danged mad. "Keep yuh bill out. An' you, Rowley, don't mess things up by startin' nothin'."

Rowley and Dell went over behind the chuck wagon. The rest of them went into the bunk tent out of the fine drizzle that was soaking them. Whang reloaded his guns and eased them into the holsters and stepped around behind the tent.

Kezar and Snell came pounding up and dismounted running. "Proddy!" Kezar yelled. "There's hell to pay. Them damn' sheepmen done fought us off and shot near thirty head of beef—"

"Yeah?" came the growled, sarcastic reply behind them. Whang stepped forward. "Lissen, Rowley's here in camp now. Smith an' his men was here uh hour 'go. An' yuh'll find Xavier up there where they kilt thet herder an' run them sheep intuh th' draw. If yuh want Lund, he's over there," he jerked his head to one side.

They looked. It was gray, misty daylight, and the soggy, huddled form of Lund was eerie appearing. Stark, the setting. They stared. Whang planted his feet wide apart and bent ever so little forward at the waist. He motioned with his head to Proddy. Proddy stepped back out of line with those two gunmen!

Kezar sucked in his breath sharply and turned back to Whang. "You got nothin' on us," he snarled. "We ain't killed nobody, and no damn' court can prove anything. You can't go up for lyin'. Come on, Snell."

"Yuh ain't goin' nowhere's, Kezar," Whang said, his voice very meaning. "Yuh figger th' cowmen ain't no right tuh grab at yuh, an' mebbe yuh could beat them off. Hell. Cowmen an' sheepmen both is goin' tuh court an' swear yuh kilt them two referees. Git it?"

"Lund and Xavier done that," Snell answered.

"*They* can't testify, though," Whang reminded them. "An' yuh'll have dozens swearin' against yuh. Proddy—" he raised his voice— "come out here an' take their guns. We'll shag them intuh town!"

He got no further. Snell and Kezar leaped apart and their hands speared for their guns. Snell took a half step for his horse as his gun came up. Kezar had half squatted. They were fast, damned fast. But they made the mistake of tackling a man who was faster, and who was also ready for them.

Whang's first shot caught Kezar in the throat and pitched him back. Kezar

had been the faster of the pair. On the heels of the first shot, two more blasted out. One from Whang's left-hand gun, the other from Snell's hogleg. A little spurt of mud showed where the bullet dug in at Whang's feet.

Snell reeled dizzily. He dropped his gun, let his hands fall to his sides and commenced walking. Then, the walk was a wobbly run. Twenty yards away, he stopped suddenly, coughed once and fell sprawling. Kezar was on his back, hands to his throat, clutched there in death.

"An' now," Whang called out, "git busy. You cowmen drive through to th' Valley. You sheepherders stay down th' crick. If yuh don't act sensible, I'll come back an' see that yuh do!"

When he rode away a few minutes later, Rowley and Proddy were shaking hands. Smith and the others had come back on the heels of the shooting. They, too, were helping bury the hatchet in a gallon jug somebody had unearthed.

IT was well up in the morning when Whang reached Argyle. He could hear voices in the courtroom. He went and stood in the door.

"This ruffian, this defendant you see before you, deliberately and with malice aforethought, attacked the complainant with a whiskey bottle, your honor," the prosecuting attorney was saying.

Judge Tucker saw Whang standing in the door. He looked back at the man on the stand. He was short and bow-legged and thin. The man he was supposed to have swung on with the bottle was a Swede nearly three times larger.

"Was the bottle empty, or did it have whiskey in it?" the Judge demanded.

"It was empty, but—"

"No buts about it. It wasn't a dangerous weepon if she wasn't loaded, and you say the bottle was empty. Case dismissed!"

Whiskers flying, Tucker retired to his private rooms. Whang came around the other way and entered.

"She's over," he spread his hands. "I got Lund and Xavier . . ." he went on.

"You mean, you egged Kezar and Snell into gunplay," Tucker frowned. "They might've got you."

"They *didn't!*" he said pointedly.

The Judge chuckled. "Whyn't you have the rest help you, and bring 'em in?"

"I hated tuh see yuh bothered with tryin' them." Whang grinned.

"That," Tucker avowed, reaching into his desk drawer and hauling out a quart, "is my idee of real judgment!"

They had a drink. They had several. It was raining like Billy-be-damned outside and the Judge's chambers were warm.

"Yessir, you sure saved time and trouble," Tucker said. "Another snort."

"Reminds me of a pome. . . . 'Nother snort? . . . Pome I heard. 'Bout—le's see. . . . The plowman homeward wends his weary way, tuh milk the pigs and feed his watered stock.

"While—while—while out upon the dark and bloody range, ol' Satan's Shepherd gathers in the flock!"

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"SLAP LEATHER, TEXAS!"

Gip Drago roved the highline solo. But came a strange vengeance-day when the outlaw Texas wolf dangerously hunted shoulder to shoulder with the Law-pack—

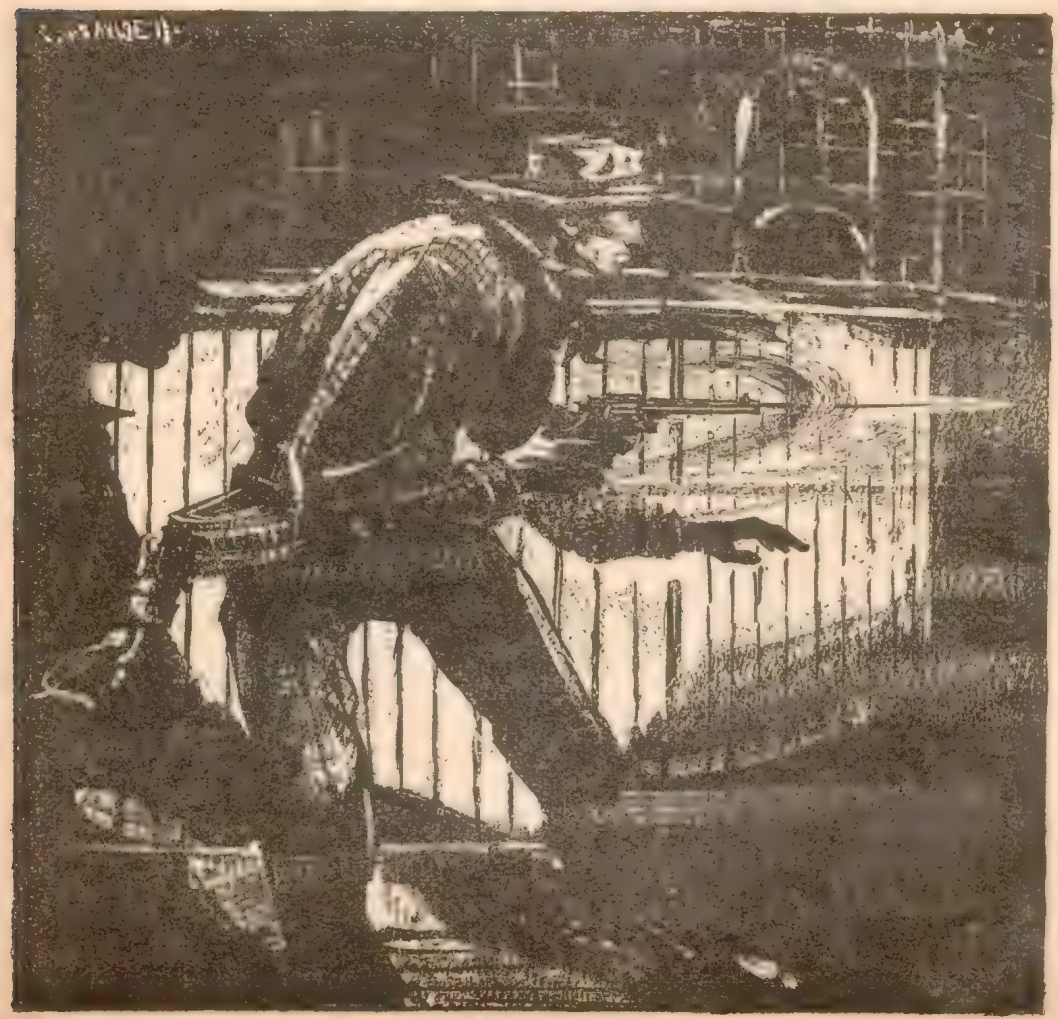
GIP DRAGO left the T-Circle horse-ranch as secretly and as fast as if old Keats Tucker were his enemy, not his employer. There were two reasons for his quiet, trailless going.

There was a cowboy on the T-Circle whom Gip had seen somewhere, some time. He could not remember where or when, but he was taking no chances. That fellow might know him for what he was—and for what he was worth. For the reward, he might go to some sheriff.

And for the other reason—Mrs. Keats Tucker was twenty years younger than grizzled Keats. She was pretty, and she knew it. She was romantic, and she and Keats both knew that! The tall, slender, dark, and dangerous Gip Drago was a man to draw her. Gip was last on the big outfit to understand the yellow-haired girl's real notions. But when the business was clear to him—well there was but one thing a man of Gip Drago's honor could do.

"I'll be leaving in a couple of days, now," he told the Tuckers one night at the sup-

"On the floor, Quade," Drago yelled. "Flat on the floor!"



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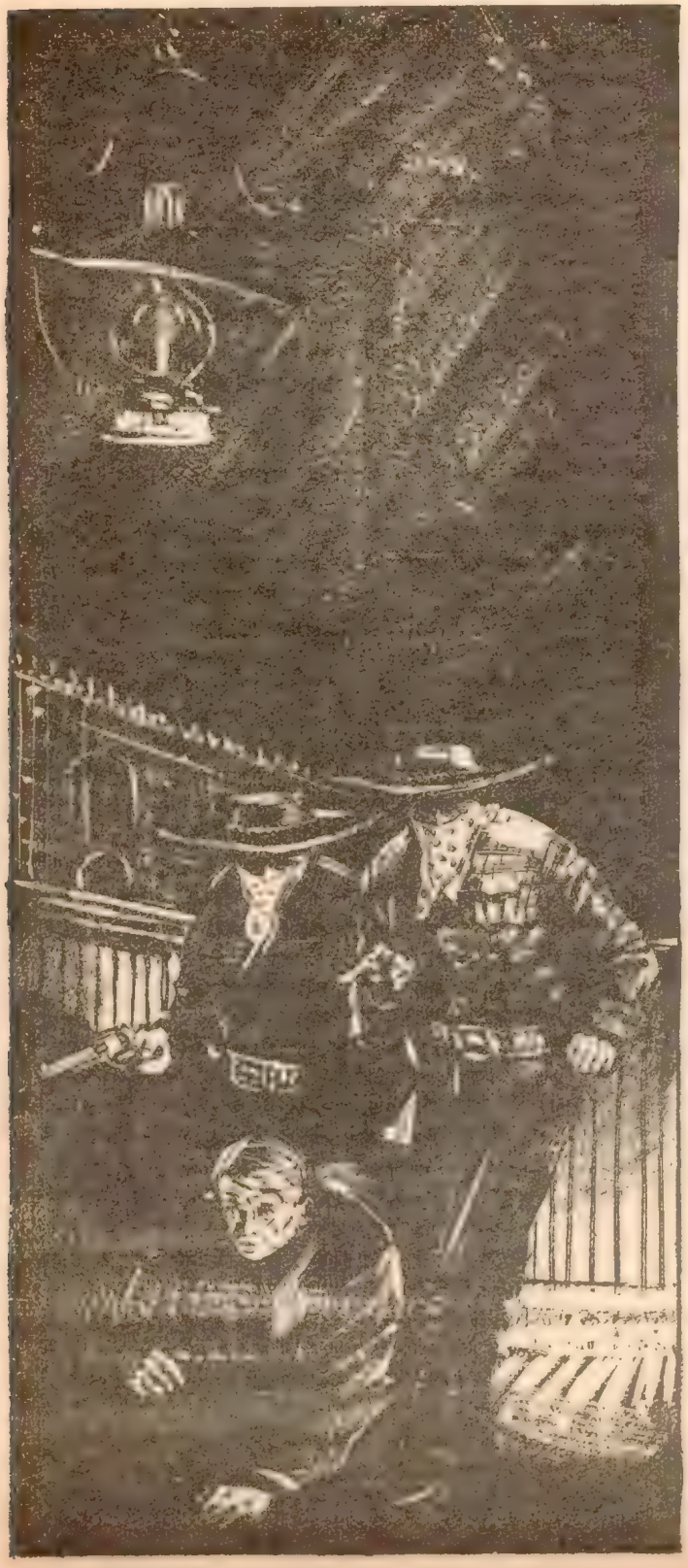
A Swift Rangeland Novelet

By Gene Cunningham



per-table. "You'll see me or hear from me as soon as I find anything worth reporting. If I get into trouble that needs gold, not lead, to buy out of, I'll let you hear quickly enough, Tucker. I have a hunch. 'Set a thief to catch a thief,' you know. Well, I've ridden the Owl Hoot and the High Lines long enough to know the look of the Horse Thief Railroad. Your thoroughbreds weren't taken by twenty-two caliber workers. You'd have come up with them, in that case. They went south over a regular line."

"Count on me for what's necessary to the last clip," Keats nodded. "Leavin' in a day or two, be yuh?"

"Day or two," Gip nodded, with the corner of his eye on Mrs. Tucker, who was frowning slightly.

Then—he left that night. For trail, he left no more hoof-prints than if Button, the tall sorrel, had no feet. Across the Flats of Doloroso and into the pines of the Sierras Negritos heights. Down from the Negritos into the Malpais of the Devil's Wife and up once more, guided by the answers of chance-met cowboys or sheepherders or nondescript and noncommittal wanderers like himself. So he sent Button over trails seldom ridden by honest men—through and across scorched cañons and the savage, cactus-spiked divides and releases of the Three Stooping Soldiers range. .He had never ridden that trail before. But he had known its landmarks for long.

At many a campfire across the Border he had heard talk of the High Lines from the riders of the lines. So he went, now, on the trail of the

vanished T-Circle thoroughbreds, a wolf running for the moment as a hound.

IT was south of Picacho Cañon that he made his thirtieth campfire. He had killed time on the trail, hunting for something to show that the horse band had come this far. He ate his meal and smoked a cigaret. Yellow-haired Lulu Tucker would have been little pleased to know how thoroughly she had been forgotten. He was going over the map of the country beyond, as he had it in his mind. Picacho, the stage-depot town, was not more than twenty miles south and west of this, his fire.

He stiffened where he sat with coffee-cup and cigaret. From the south there came the *thudda-thud, thudda-thud,* of racing horses through the moonless dark. He listened, scowling, with left hand going out to the walnut stock of the carbine lying across his saddle. He had no notion about those riders who came so desperately fast across rough country in the darkness.

He let go the carbine and reached for the coffee-pot. He capsized it upon the fire and picked up the carbine. The horses sounded as if they were coming straight at him. But still several hundred feet away, he guessed. Not much chance that they had seen the small glow of his dying fire. They should pass him by.

But when they were no more than fifty yards, at most, from where he squatted beside the saddle when still they came on, pounding straight at him, he came swiftly to his feet. His toe caught the frypan and jerked it. There was a hissing sound of grease upon a coal. Up flared a sudden, treacherous little blaze. A fierce yell from the riders greeted the light. Gip leaped automatically away from the blaze.

The horses were pulled in with clatter of hoofs on small stones. Almost instantly, someone started shooting. Gip by this time was flat between two great, low boulders. From the riders came a hail of lead that beat the fire into a dozen tiny conflagrations that licked up bunch-grass and greasewood and mesquite.

"Ah, hell!" Gip said to himself with a weary resignation.

He pushed the carbine around the end of the boulder and fired back at the orange splashes that dappled the line of the attackers. They responded with a ragged volley. He stopped firing, watching for an advance, for they were mostly afoot now. Minutes passed with bursts of fire to mark several advances and retreats. Then there was a sudden wild yell. A clatter of vanishing hoofs. East, they were going.

He went down to the fire again when the sounds had died away. But he did not rekindle it. He got his saddle onto Button, who was staked out in a patch of grass well off to the side. He moved camp back into an arroyo and slept the night out. At down he went back, to cook his breakfast and look the ground over.

THERE had been at least a half-dozen of the men. The hoof-prints bore out his count of the separate flashes of the night before. On soft spots of the rock-strewn slope, he found seven or eight sets of bootprints. Found, also a bullet-smashed silver buckle that might have come from someone's fancy belt.

He was looking at the buckle when, on another soft spot, he found where two men had stood. And on the trampled ground was the mark in several places of what seemed to be a peg-leg. It was an indentation more than an inch deep, roughly round in shape.

"Well," he told himself, as he ate bacon and beans and crackers and drank his coffee, "I'd like to know who they were and where they were going. As for their coming—it was from Picacho, unless I'm a poor guesser. If I don't find some reason in Picacho for their hurry and their suspicion of the men they meet—"

He had less than eight miles to go, before the vague trail he followed turned into the stage-road that led to Picacho. He began to overtake occasional riders, then a wagon or two, as he came closer to the county seat town. Still, not a word to explain the attitude of those riders he was back-tracking. He watched their trail, rather than the road. When their trail turned off—or, rather, when he made the place where they had come into the stage-road—he turned that way.

He could see the county seat in the valley below him, when he found the

blood-caked depression by a mesquite-tree. He got off to stare. There were many tracks on the ground. Too many to let him spell out a record of what had happened. But that a man had sprawled all but motionless there, bleeding profusely, there was no doubt. He looked around, shrugged. After all, it was no real affair of his and certainly the sight of blood, or of the place where a man had died, or of a man dying, was no novelty to Gip Drago. He rode on across the pasture and into the road again. So into town.

Picacho was quite typical. Three or four streets ran the length of the ragged 'dobe and brick town, one, the main drag, ending at a two-story red brick court house. A dozen cross-streets three or four blocks long, only those in the center of town built up on both sides. Cottonwoods were everywhere.

The town seemed tense to Gip, as he jogged along the main street. There were tight little groups on store-porches and under the awnings before saloons. They looked curiously at him, with little change in weathered faces except the narrowing of intent eyes. He swung down at a hitch-rack and tied a slip-knot in his neck-rope—a valuable precaution to a man who never knew how fast he might need to leave a place. . . .

DIRECTLY across the street was a one-story 'dobe store almost a block long. Here was the greatest collection of Picacho men. Gip hesitated between going over and going into the saloon at his elbow and having a drink. He decided in favor of the drink. It was pretty certain that whatever excitement the town had seen, there would be plenty in the barroom talking about it.

The barroom was doing a land-office business. Gip edged in near the door and while he waited to be served learned that a robbery and two murders had taken place across the street at Pike's, the big store, just at dusk the evening before. Mentally, he checked the distance between Picacho and his camp. He nodded. His gang was the gang, doubtless.

He had his drink and was reaching for the bottle the second time when the swing-doors flapped back. A big, slim, muscular youngster, about Gip's own size and coloring, stood staring at the drinkers. He had a ball-pointed silver star on the breast of blue, silky flannel shirt. Twin pearl-handled Colts sagged on his thighs. A wide-rimmed, high-crowned white Stetson was on the back of his curly dark head. He raised his voice: "Who's the fella rode that unbranded sorrel into town?"

Gip turned slowly at the bar and looked more carefully at the officer. He was a good-looking youngster, but his eyes were a trifle too close together to suit Gip. But there seemed no reason to deny Button's ownership.

"I reckon I'm the candidate, Sheriff," he drawled, stepping out toward the doors. "Something about him?"

"You come from toward Picacho Cañon an' you never used the road except a li'l ways just outside o' town. How come?"

"Trail I was following didn't, either," Gip shrugged.

"Meet anybody up thataway?" the other asked slowly.

"Too many. That's why of the trailing. Six-seven men shot up my camp close to the Cañon. Didn't seem to need any reason for choosing me. I chunked some lead back at 'em and they decided to hightail. When I had slept on the business, I figured that the answer would be somewhere on their backtrail. I see it was! Did they get much at the store?"

"About eight thousand. That store's used for a bank by half the county. But they got two clerks that was sleepin' on the premises. An' this is their fifth job in six months!"

He looked Gip up and down, very thoughtfully, then made a beckoning jerk of dark head. The drinkers had crowded up to stare from Gip to him.

"Come on an' let's auger this out. Seems like you know more than anybody else. Let's go down to the office."

Outside, Gip fell in step beside the deputy. Closer inspection of his badge showed him to be not sheriff, but perhaps acting in that capacity. The dark youngster seemed to have almost forgotten Gip. He stared blankly straight ahead. His face was strained. It made Gip wonder.

He had to repeat his question before getting an answer.

"Huh?" the deputy grunted. "Oh, yeh. I'm Pate Fenner, actin' sheriff, an' I'm goin' to clean up this mess, I tell you! Tom Nunnally's sheriff. He's sick. He wouldn't be worth a hoot if he was up! He's too damn' old for the job an'—"

"Here's where you show him up," Gip nodded.

THEY crossed the street to the door of the court house marked "Sheriff's Office—Tax Collector." Fenner stood back with a grunt to let Gip go in first. He waved at a chair and Gip lounged over to sit in it, watching inscrutably. The handsome acting sheriff went around the desk to sit with it between them, and scowl down at its scarred top. He looked up abruptly. Gip studied him. He did not yet see through Fenner. But he thought that, when he did, it would be interesting.

"Well," Fenner rapped at him. "What about it? Who done the trick? You must have some idees."

He sounded tense. His voice all but shook. Leaning forward he accidentally brushed a brass pig-paperweight to the floor. He cussed, stooped to pick it up.

"Don't know. Except that, figuring time and all, it must have been the same bunch that tried to smoke me up. I reckon that, coming as they did with blood on the back-trail, they weren't in any condition to see a fire before them and take it calmly. Yes, it must have been that bunch. Fifth job, is it?"

"Fifth," Fenner nodded. "You haven't any notions, then?"

"I could stand search," Gip shrugged carelessly. "One thing has me wondering, though. How was it I didn't find your tracks on their trail, anywhere?"

"Because Tom Nunnally's always dragged us out on their trail an' that trail has always ended at one place: the broken ground west o' where you must've been camped. I took a posse an' hightailed it for there, aimin' to be ahead, but they never showed up. But I'll heel that outfit! *Por dios,* I'll heel 'em! I'm goin' to show that dam' old mossback, Nunnally. I'm goin' to be settin' where nobody can jar me loose, by the time he's up an' about. This job, I'm free to tell you, is worth close to twelve thousand a year, with fees an' all. They'll tell you in Picacho County that I'm ambitious. You're damn right I am! I'm goin' up an' the man that stops me'll have to kill me. Now, I need some help an' you're the man to hand it over—"

"Hold your horses," Gip grinned slowly. "I've business of my own—a job that may take me a year."

"You'll forget it!" Fenner said. "Yeh. You'll forget it."

HE grinned at Gip. There was amusement in his dark face. That and something else—calm confidence.

"Set a thief to catch a thief, they do say. Well, Mr. Gip Drago, we'll do that. If you don't know who's workin' this territory, you'll damn soon find out—to save your own skin."

"So I'm Drago, am I?" Gip drawled, without moving.

"You're Drago. Here's the proof. Circular's a li'l' old, but it'll do. Two thousand reward an' ever'thing. I'll pass it up—the reward. Because you're worth lots more to me than that, actin' as a kind o' payless deputy. What about it?"

"You spotted me in the saloon," Gip said slowly. "You are a right good actor, Fenner. But, what's to keep me from putting a hole through you and riding off?"

"My puttin' a hole through you first, if you wiggle a finger. I pulled my gun when I stooped to pick up that paperweight. I'm not takin' any chances with a wolf like you, Drago. I'm coverin' you an' I'm a dead shot. Think it over: I down you an' collect two thousand. More: I do a li'l' bit o' fancy-work, an' you're one o' the gang that done the killin's. Hell, you admitted it! You signed a confession before you made your bust an' I had to kill you. Now what?"

"Looks like I'm a volunteer," Gip nodded. "But what use I'll be, even yet—well! I just don't see it."

"You will," Fenner promised him grimly. "An' don't get a notion that all you got to do is say you'll work, then slide out. There'll be a couple in town watchin' you, all the time. They are men I can trust an' handle. They'll know who

you are an' what you're doin' for me. So long's you do that an' nothin' else, you're safe. Try a sneak or a false motion an' you'll collect a hide full of Blue Whistlers."

Gip nodded. Sardonically, he recalled that he had thought this was to be an interesting young man to know. He conceded now that young Fenner was a dangerous man. Ambitious. Cold-blooded. He had been under a strain, a few minutes before. But that hadn't kept him from sliding that paperweight from the desk and pulling his gun while pretending to pick up the brass pig. Yes, he was a dangerous customer.

"He'll bear watching," Gip thought. "He pass up that two thousand because I help him land in the sheriff's chair? I'll bet! He thinks because I've ridden the High Lines I can spot High Line riders. He'll scoop the credit and assure himself of the job—then try putting the cuffs on me for that two thousand and the glory that's in it. Well. We'll see if he's the first able to use Gip Drago. We'll see! If I don't disappear tonight. . . ."

Fenner got up. He had a gun in his hand pointing at Gip. He walked easily backward to a door in the office rear wall. He stopped inside it, shoulder against jamb. He spoke in a low voice, as to someone within that back room. Answer came in a guttural tone. Gip had the feeling of someone staring intently at him from the darkness back there. Then Fenner came back, grinning a little, to half-sit on the desk-end. Ostentatiously, he reholstered his Colt.

"Since we're to do something," said Gip, "let's *do* something! Did either or both of those dead clerks put up a battle with the gang? Or did the townsfolk shoot after 'em?"

"I don't know what the clerks did," Fenner frowned. "The gang hightailed before anybody on the street knew 'twas more'n a bunch o' cowboys the marshal ought've corralled. Why?"

"Somebody did a lot of bleeding out in that pasture I came through. You would have run onto something interesting, if you hadn't decided to beat the old sheriff at his own game—I mean, if you'd followed the gang."

"Hell," Fenner grunted, standing erect. "Let's go take a look. I'll gather up two-three men to go with us."

He waited for Gip to precede him out of the office. They moved off in the direction of the saloon in which they had met. Gip looked furtively backward. Nobody followed them out of the office—not by the front door, at least. But that someone was watching him closely he saw no reason to doubt at all.

IN the saloon before which Button was hitched, Fenner looked scowlingly about. Gip, with face changeless, but with a twinkle far back in his dark eyes, looked around also. He noted three men who eyed the acting sheriff without pretense of pleasure. Two of them were hulking red-haired men, both in shabby overalls and worn boots, and like enough of sullen, freckled faces to be cousins, if not brothers. The third was a dark, hawk-faced, shifty-eyed youngster in his early twenties or younger than that, who was something of a dude.

Fenner saw him watching the trio. He spoke without looking directly at them.

"Hard cases! Watch your step when your back's to that outfit. The two red-heads are kin o' some kind—that's Seth an' Sebe Yoger. The kid's Sal Eddy, slickest gun-slinger in these parts. I'd bet that he'd give you all the pullin' you wanted, if you was to try leather-slappin' with him. He's been hangin' out with the Yogers on a poverty-struck li'l' old outfit north o' town, the last year an' a half. They work around one outfit an' another. Men I want ain't here. Let's be goin.'"

They crossed the street to the robbed store, Gip leading Button. Here was still a gaping, curious crowd, staring fascinatedly at the crimson patch on the floor by a counter, where one of the clerks had died without waking, a knife through him a half-dozen times. The second man had been sleeping on a cot in the rear of the store. He had put up a terrific battle, Gip gathered—one out of all proportion to his small size. The stub-counter close to his bed had been knocked over, bedding and even goods from the shelves scattered over the whole back of the store.

"All right," Fenner told Gip curtly. "We'll be goin'. An', fellow," he added in an undertone, "don't try a whizzer!"

They rode out on Gip's backtrail, which was the trail of the gang leaving town. Three men had come from the bunch at the store: two deputies—one a gangling tow-head, the other a dark and squatty man apparently voiceless, who looked like a breed or, perhaps, a fullblood Indian—one cowboy.

When they dismounted at the blood-caked depression in the pasture, this taciturn deputy began to circle. He broke into a jerky little trot. He disappeared into an arroyo. Fenner watched him go, then seemed to forget him as he scowled at the bloody ground. Then came a yell from the vanished one.

"He's found somethin'," said Fenner. "Let's go."

THEY swung up and rode toward the arroyo. The deputy was pulling a man's body out of a crack in the arroyo well. They found a slope down which the horses could go. They pulled in to look at the dead man. He was fearfully bloody. His face was indistinguishable. He looked as if he had been beaten to death with a gun-barrel or club.

Gip's roving eyes, coming last to the boots on the dead man's small feet, narrowed abruptly. He stared at the thick body broodingly. Almost, he nodded. But he kept silent. There was no reason to tell Fenner that this was his one-time sergeant. Gip had last heard that Ligon Pryor was out of the Rangers and working as a stock-detective.

"That's the feller been hangin' around town a week," the tow-headed deputy drawled, and spat with head critically on one side. "Pate, yuh reckon he was stakin' out the job for them fellers? Mebbe they fell out over a split an' killed him."

"Fell out over a split when they were all riding hell-bent out of town, expecting to be followed inside of minutes?" Gip scoffed, the lift of dark brows and tight mouth making his mirthless grin satanic. "They had no idea you people were going to try heading 'em off. They thought you were right behind 'em!"

"Keep your damn head closed till somebody asks your opinion," Pate Fenner snarled at him. "I'm runnin' this show an' I can see ever'thing you can—an' make up my mind about what it all means, too. Ain't no doubt this was one o' the gang. As for them fallin' out—hell! They might easy've planted this fat fellow in town to stake out the job, then downed him to get out o' payin' off."

"You'd think so," Gip nodded impassively. Fenner looked up angrily, seeming to find the hidden meaning. "But if they wanted to rid themselves of him, why not one bullet? Why all this hammering of him? They don't fit together—the facts and your theorizing. Of course, I'm sorry about that!"

"If you don't keep that trap o' yours shut, you'll likely have it shut for you," Fenner snarled, more viciously than before. "This-here's one o' the gang an' he's worth seven-fifty. Old Pike put up a forty-one hundred dollar reward for six of 'em. All right, Mike," he grunted to the Indian-faced deputy. "Put him on your horse an' let's take him in. He's Number One. The rest'll come along, too. What the hell you grinnin' about?" he snapped at Gip.

Gip's grin widened, for all that he had discovered the disappearance of his white-handled Colt from a saddle-bag.

"I was just thinking," he drawled. "Sometimes these gangs go on for years before they kill each other off."

The gangling tow-head and the cowboy laughed. Pate Fenner's dark face flushed cherry-red, then went white. With hand on his gun, he struck at Gip. The blow was ill-timed, but there were the red prints of his fingertips on Gip's swarthy cheek, with the snap of it. Gip looked grimly, steadily, at the deputy.

"You keep that tongue o' yours still," Fenner cried furiously. "I ain't takin' a damn thing off you, an' you know why! You'll come along an' do what you're told, or—or—"

III

FENNER reined around and yelled at the deputy, Mike. Then he led the way back to town. The tow-head and the cowboy looked sidelong at Gip, very curiously. When Mike did not appear quickly enough and Fenner turned in the saddle to stare that way, the cowboy looked at his back, then at Gip. He shook his head, then lifted a knotty fist, tapping himself

with forefinger of left hand. Gip looked thoughtfully at him, then stared blankly upward and smiled gently—but not at all pleasantly.

"I reckon I owe Ligon Pryor something," he meditated. "He kept me from a particularly nasty dying, that time at Tres Cruces. If I can put a slug through the hairpin who beat him to death, it'll sort of even that. I wonder what outfit he was working for, in this neighborhood. He must have bumped into the gang as they were leaving town. They brought him along, but why? Unless they knew he was a detective—knew him and knew that he'd recognize them—they'd have drilled him and ridden on. But Ligon knew so many hard cases. . . ."

He withdrew his gaze from the serene blue Texas sky, to look steadily at Pate Fenner. With brown hand at mustache-point he grinned faintly. There was another debt he would pay. He had intended leaving with dark. Now there was reason to stay.

They drew up before Pike's and proudly Fenner ordered Mike Sixponies to pull forward. The townsmen came running, to crowd up around the dead Ligon Pryor. Old Pike waddled out.

"Got one a'ready?" he cried. "Fine work, Pate. Fi-i—"

He stared at the dead man, then made a disgusted sound.

"Robber? Robber! Doddern it, Pate, that's Ligon Pryor, our stock-detective. You'll be in a fine mess if you killed Pryor. We—a half-dozen of us—imported him to clean up some o' the stock-stealin' we been havin'."

"We never killed him," Pate Fenner snarled. "But if he was all right, what the hell was he doin' ridin' with that outfit? He might've told you-all he was a stock-detective—"

"Fenner!" Pike roared. "He wasn't tellin' us nothin'! Ligon Pryor was a Ranger sergeant an' turned stock-detective. I've knowed him for years. An' he was ridin' with 'em because they took him along—out o' the store. He'd slept here three-four times. Likely, he was sleepin' here last night. I suspicioned that Ollie Capper never put up the fight that tore up the doddern place. 'Twas Pryor done it! An' they took him along because they knowed who he was. Likely he recognized them. What'd they beat him up that way for, else? Because they was mad, that's why!"

GIP put the shrewd old storekeeper down as a man who might be valuable. If he had any suspicions of the stock-thieves' identity, those notions might help in identifying Pryor's murderers. It was quite possible that the stock-thieves and the store-robbers were the same men. Then something that glinted in Pryor's clenched hand caught his eye.

Unostentatiously Gip slid from the saddle, loafed over to stand beside the body, and with hand behind him worked at the thing gripped in taut fingers. He got it out with some difficulty. By the feel of it he identified it as a buckle much like that which he had picked up the night before. He slid it into a pocket of his sagging chaps.

Fenner rode off to the sheriff's office, with curt orders to Mike Sixponies and the tow-head to turn Pryor's body over to the undertaker. He seemed to be confident that Gip was tamed. Gip put Button in a livery-corral and ate his noon meal in a small eating-house run by a brisk, snapping-eyed and pretty girl.

By the time he sat down at the counter the gangling tow-headed deputy and that cowboy who had been with them in the pasture were finishing their meal in this same place. They looked guilty, somehow, as they went past Gip and nodded. A couple of men there looked curiously at him. When they were gone the girl behind the counter jerked her black head toward the door.

"They was tellin' about Fenner hittin' you," she explained. "If you aimed to stick in Picacho—"

"I didn't," Gip said gravely. "But I understand what you mean: I'd have to kill Fenner or be killed by him."

"Killed by him, likely," she nodded. There was an odd tightness to her most-vivid red mouth. "Sal Eddy's the only one faster'n Pate Fenner with a gun."

"If he's faster?" Gip grinned gently. "My, my!"

"What I mean is, on the gunplay Sal's certainly faster. But, Pate Fenner uses his head. He's cold-blooded an' schemin'.

An' *he* don't let things knock him off balance."

"Who's the girl he's goin' to marry?" Gip frowned, artistically. For it seemed to him that there was a personal animus here, motivating this girl's talk of Fenner.

"Dolly Quade, that's who! She's one o' them simperin' blue-eyed, doll-faced blondes. But she's the daughter o' Alvin Quade an' she'll fall heir to the bank he owns. Nothin' wrong with that head o' Pate Fenner's. Soon's he found out he had a chance at Dolly—an' lord knows he *is* good-lookin'—he dropped. He went right after her."

"That your gun back there?" Gip asked absently. "I'd certainly like to buy it from you."

"What? My gun? No, sir! I don't want to sell it at all. Why don't you go over to the hardware store an' buy one, if you ain't got a gun?"

GIP drank his coffee, grinning faintly. He was not going to buy a gun, if he could help it, where whoever Fenner had set to watch him could check the purchase. They had him unarmed, now. Fenner, doubtless, had slipped the white-handled .45 out of his saddle-pocket, while they were afoot, looking into the arroyo. They would be satisfied if they could find no trace of his acquiring another six-shooter. They would treat him as an unarmed man. He pushed the coffee cup across the counter and, when the black-eyed girl reached mechanically for it, his hand closed over her wrist. She stared at him speculatively.

"Two of us he slapped, no?" Gip drawled. "Perhaps if I tell you that, when he hit out so bravely at me today, I had no gun and he knew it, and that the minute I buy a gun in the hardware store he'll know about it—you'll see why I want yours."

She was motionless for seconds. Then she moved closer to him, putting both arms on the counter-edge, so that her face was less than a foot from his. She watched him unwaveringly.

"Can you—handle it?" she whispered. "I've been tryin' to rig Sal Eddy up to do it. Promised him ever'thing an' anything. I own this place. I'm no damn hash-slinger for somebody else. I make money here. Pate's the only man ever slipped anything past me! An' he's not going to work that racket an' laugh about it! If I give you that gun, so's he thinks you're still naked—"

There was a small sound outside of the door. Smoothly, quickly, she drew back with the coffee cup and turned toward the pot. Mike Sixponies shambled in. He sat down on a stool and snarled at the girl. She set Gip's coffee down and glared.

"Say, you! Keep that Injun shirt o' yours on when you're in my place, or stay out o' here. Don't you try snappin' at me or your war whoop'll turn into a howl."

Mike leaned across the counter and looked at her. Small, smokily-black eyes were slitted. A corner of his thick mouth went up in a wolfish snarl. She watched him and Gip saw fear coming into her eyes.

"You talk too much," Mike Sixponies almost whispered. "Some day you remember that you talked too much."

He relaxed. He had not once looked at Gip. He sat grinning at the wall ahead of him until she brought food and set it down. She moved things about on the shelf opposite Gip. Mike ate noisily, eyes set straight before him. She came out from behind the counter.

As she passed Gip something hard and heavy brushed his leg. His hand closed upon the short-barreled .45. It vanished inside his shirt, nestling in the waistband of his overalls. He put down two silver dollars on the counter and stood up. She looked up at him. He smiled satanically down at her. Then he went out without speaking a word. Mike Sixponies turned on the stool to watch him go.

GIP loafed through the afternoon sunshine to the livery corral. In the stall that held Button he examined the Colt furtively and swiftly. It was a good gun and it was loaded all around. He replaced it in his waistband and went out. In the saloon across from Pike's he saw the Yoger cousins with Sal Eddy and four cowboys, in a drawgame. Gip retired to a corner with an old San Antonio paper. He kept watch on the whole barroom over its top. So he saw that Sal Eddy was much interested in him. More than in his cards, it seemed.

The afternoon dragged. He saw noth-

ing of Pate Fenner until dusk. Then it was only a glimpse as the acting sheriff passed the swing-doors of the saloon. Gip got up and had a drink with the cowboy who had gone to the pasture with them. He drifted out. Yellow lights were springing up in windows up and down the one main street and on the cross-streets. He moved toward the livery-barn. He thought that he would make Pike's by the back door and see what the old storekeeper knew—or would tell. Pike might help him.

He was in the dusky wagon-yard and near the line of stalls when there was a grunt behind him. Mike Sixponies, hand on six-shooter, stood watching him. The deputy made a jerking motion of left thumb—back toward the entrance on the main street.

"*Think* you try that," he said, placidly. "Now you go back. You try to slip out—" He tapped Colt-butt with thumb-nail.

He followed Gip to the entrance and stood there, watching. Gip shrugged. Perhaps he could make Pike's from the other end of town, if not now, a little later. He thought that the Indian would watch Button pretty closely. He would hardly guess that Gip wanted to see Pike.

So, for an hour or so, as the darkness thickened, he drifted from saloon to dance-hall to gambling-house. Presently, he stood in the shadows across from the eating-house. He saw the light go out. The girl did not come through the front door, so she must be leaving by the back.

He crossed the street slowly and looked furtively up and down at the corner of the narrow two-story building. Then he slipped into the narrow space between it and the next building, and moved silently toward the back. There was an outside staircase, with a four-by-six landing at the second floor. Moving back to have a look at the door opening on that landing, it seemed to Gip that the girl had just closed it.

On impulse, he began to climb the stairs. Step by step, he went up without sound, until he put out a hand to knock upon her door. Then he stiffened before his knuckles had touched the panel. For the girl spoke, inside. Her voice was high-pitched, shaky.

"Don't you," she said. "Don't you dare!"

Gip hesitated. He wondered who was in the room with her. Then there was a rattling sound at the door-lock. Automatically, Gip let his hand drop to the knob, turned it and pushed. For someone's hand was turning the key, to lock the two of them in that room. Gip was suddenly burned up by a curiosity to see. . . .

IV

THE door opened inward four inches or so before it bumped something and its movement was halted. Gip put his shoulder against it and felt the obstructing body move backward. He slid inside and faced the tense Indian deputy, Mike Sixponies.

"Oh," said Gip and Mike together. "You!"

The girl was clear across the little room, back to the head of her bed, one clawing hand up at the neck of her dress. She gaped at Gip. Mike Sixponies suddenly grinned and moved slidingly toward the door. Gip wheeled to keep his face to the Indian. Mike drove the door shut with a heel, reached behind him and turned the key. His grin widened as he looked at the girl.

"I say you talk too damn much," he nodded. For the first time, he moved his right hand so that now Gip saw the knife in it.

He slid toward the girl, but with little darting side-glances toward Gip as he approached her. She cowered against the bed. The hand came up from dress-neck to mouth. Dilated eyes glared at the bestial face. Mike's left hand lifted, went out toward her. The knife slid up.

"What do you think you aim to do?" Gip drawled, scowling.

"Cut her damn heart out," Mike flung at him over-shoulder.

"And then what? How do you think you'll get away with it?"

Mike turned his head, to grin at Gip.

"Easy, you fool! You walk right into it. I don't git away with it—I ain't never in it! *I* just run upstairs when gal yell, find you kill her—bang! I kill you!"

Gip nodded, grinning satanically. His hand slid inside his shirt. Mike gaped at

the stubby .45 that so magically covered him.

"Outside—with your hands up!" Gip rapped at him. *"Pronto!"*

Mike hesitated and Gip moved the Colt slightly. Sullenly, then, the Indian's hands went up. Obediently, he let himself be herded toward the door. With muzzle in his side, he stood motionless while Gip took the key from his pocket and unlocked the door. On the landing, in the darkness, he made a sudden move. The .45 exploded with muffled sound. Mike Sixponies fell over the landing rail and landed with a thudding noise on the ground below. Gip stared downward but saw no movement. He turned back to the door, put his head inside. The girl still stood with teeth set in the back of her hand, glaring that way. She was quivering—scared.

"It's all over," he said quietly. "Can you play your part? All you have to remember is that you don't know a thing. I'll take care of the rest of it. Can you do it? Buck up, girl! It wasn't any use for me to settle him, if you're going to let me down! Neither you nor I knows a thing!"

"I—I—" She swallowed, shook her head violently. "I'll be all right in a minute. Don't you worry. I won't let you down! I'll swear I don't know a thing! An', thank you—"

He nodded swiftly, then closed the door and ran down the stairway. Mike lay moveless where he had landed. Gip left him there while he raced to the front of the building to look up and down the street. That single, muffled shot had attracted no attention. There were two horses at a hitch-rack fifty yards upstreet. Gip moved that way. It was a small saloon and inside he saw several drinkers. He turned again to the rack, swiftly loosed one horse and swung up. He rode it back to the deputy's body, laid Mike Sixponies across the saddle and swung up behind the cantle.

ALONG the quieter, darker length of the street paralleling the main drag he rode until he could dump the body on the ground by the court house. Then he went back, drawing no attention that he could see. With an old tow sack he wiped the blood from the saddle-seat and tied the horse again to the rack. Dust scattered over the spot where Mike had lain seemed to finish the job. He washed his hands in a water-barrel behind a store, then moved out to the main street. He slid unostentatiously in among the cowboys lounging on a saloon porch.

He was sitting there when the gangling tow-headed deputy came upstreet from the court house and began asking for him, describing him as the "tall, dark feller that helped find Pryor's body." Gip got up and asked what was wanted.

"Pate Fenner wants to talk to yuh at the office," the deputy said meditatively. "Nah. I don't 'no' what about. Yuh'll find Pate in the office. Seen Mike Sixponies?"

"Down at the livery-corral quite a while back," Gip answered calmly, moving toward the court house.

Pate Fenner was behind the desk, both hands out of sight. He asked the same question—about Mike Sixponies. But his tone—or so it seemed to Gip—was somewhat suspicious. He stared hard at Gip when for the second time Gip mentioned the livery-corral.

"Well, we'll see. Now, you listen to me an' listen hard. I figgered you was goin' to be a lot o' use in huntin' up that gang's trail, an' it don't look like you're goin' to be worth a dime—much less two thousand dollars—for that. But"—he leaned across the desk with dark face triumphant—"it turns out, I don't *need* your help for that! Here's what's on for tonight:

"I know—an' it don't matter how I know—that gang's aimin' to hit another crack this very night at Quade's bank! Me an' you an' Mike Sixponies—the Injun deputy o' mine—we're goin' to lay 'em in a row. Just us! There won't be nobody to cut in on a reward. We'll lie up an' wait for 'em an' when they show up—"

"There's a half-dozen of 'em," Gip objected. "Three of us against that many, and maybe more, will mean taking a big chance that part of 'em will get away."

"Keep your mouth shut," Fenner snarled. "I'm runnin' this show my own way. You'll string along, or you'll find yourself in a cell, waitin' for the sheriff

to come get you. You'll help Mike an' me handle that crowd, an', Drago, I got too much hangin' on this deal to stand for a bobble. *Por dios!* You make one move tonight that I don't like an' I'll kill you! That poster says 'dead or alive' you know."

"WHAT'S the layout," Gip shrugged. "Fellow, I've been in a sight more tights than you'll ever dream of seeing. You make a lot of noise about my making a false move. But if I don't know what's what, there's no telling what I'll do. There's not a bit of sense to you keeping everything to yourself. If I'm to help lay out this bunch, I'm entitled to know something."

"A fellow—drunk bum—was asleep in the livery corral in a haystack. He overheard some of the bunch figgerin' up the details. He was too scared to move. He don't know who the bunch was. But they'll yank old Alvin Quade out o' his nightshirt an' bring him down to open up for 'em. We'll be behind an old shed back o' the bank, when they show up. It'll be old pie! Three o' us against six o' them, won't mean a thing."

"What about Quade? He's your father-in-law to be, isn't he? He's more than apt to collect lead. There'll be plenty flying."

"I'll take care o' that," Fenner snapped. "Now, you know the layout, or enough to do you. You remember what I told you—about not makin' any move I don't like."

"Sixponies know about this?" Gip inquired—artistically.

"Not yet. You slide out, now, an' hunt him up. I reckon if you just head for the livery-corral an' kind o' stand around, Mike'll find *you!*"

Gip nodded and left the office. His head slid sideway a trifle as he passed the corner of the court house, around which Mike Sixponies lay on the dusty ground. So the gang was to hit Alvin Quade's bank, bring the banker down to open the vault for them, and Pate Fenner would take care of Quade. Suddenly, Gip recalled what the girl had said in the eating house, about Fenner marrying Dolly Quade.

"Oh," he said to himself. "So that's the way of it. If father-in-law-to-be is unfortunately killed, Dolly becomes the heiress. Mr. Fenner, when you slaughter a pig, you certainly use everything through and including the squeal. The idea is to gather in forty-five hundred dollars' worth of bank and store robbers and make your bride-to-be a rich girl. All at one stroke! Then I'm to add another couple of thousands to the bankroll. And you shove Sheriff Tom Nunnally into the discard. Fine! I think we'll have to put a few spokes into your wheel, though."

He would talk to old Pike, he decided. Now that his shadow was gone—for he had no doubt that Mike Sixponies had been the man who looked him over from the back room of the office—he felt safe in heading directly for the store. Before he reached it, he saw the Yoger cousins and young Sal Eddy. They were standing on a corner, where the light from a saloon-front showed them pretty clearly. Gip slowed his pace, staring at them. He moved in closer to the building-front, into the shadows, and he walked very silently.

"That's a shady looking bunch, and Sal Eddy's quite willing to talk about doing a killing to get the restaurant girl. Of course, he might be just talking, without any intention of killing Fenner—even trying it. And yet, I don't like 'em!"

He came within twenty feet of them and they showed no signs of hearing or seeing him. Eddy's voice lifted a little: "I tell yuh, I'm goin' to see my gal. There's time."

"Nah," one of the Yogers burst out. "Don't ye, Sal! Later on, but not now. Forgit it till later."

As he shook his head sullenly, they moved closer to him, arguing, gesticulating. Sal Eddy lowered his head like a sulky child and dug his heel into the dirt, moving his slim shoulders irritably. The two older men locked arms with him and drew him toward a saloon's doorway. Gip stopped and watched them go.

"Why don't they want him to see his girl?" he asked himself. He stood staring down at the ground, opposite the place where they had argued, wondering. "What have they on?"

STARING at the ground, he stiffened abruptly, then leaned a little forward. He looked flashingly at the saloon's door.

saw nobody in or around it, and went quickly across the space between to stare tensely down at the several smallish, round depressions in the dust. They matched the "peg-leg" holes he had seen out at Picacho Cañon. He lifted his head savagely: "Not a peg-legged man, out there," he breathed. "But Sal Eddy, digging his heel into the ground with that nervous trick of his when arguing. Now—which one beat Ligon Pryor to death? For, *por dios!* if Sal Eddy was in on the store robbery and the murders, so were those Yogers."

He went swiftly back into the shadows as the swing doors squeaked. He watched the trio come out, look up and down, then go off toward the livery corral in which Button waited.

Gip watched them from a safe distance until he was sure that the corral was their objective. Then he went quickly by a round-about course to the corral. When they came through the big gateway and on across the open space in which freighters' wagons stood, back to the half-square of stalls, he was ahead of them and waiting. They passed him and went into a stall farther down. He slid after them noiselessly.

"Now, listen, Sal," a Yoger was saying when he stopped beside the door. "Ye got to handle the hawses tonight. If ye go wanderin' off to that dam' gal's, no tellin' what'll happen. I want ye to promise ye'll stick right here till we come back. We'll snake ol' Quade out a' bed an' make it short an' sweet."

"All right," Sal agreed sullenly. "Leave me that pint."

The two thick figures came out of the darkness of the stall and passed Gip. He let them go. He could hear the gurgle of liquor inside where Sal waited. Then a match scratched. By its small flame he saw the dark, young face—saw, also the hanging saddles and bridles on the stall's wall. Something glinted.

"Oh, Sal," he called cautiously.

"Who's it?" the other countered suspiciously.

"Never mind. Seth sent me—"

There was the rustle of hay, then Sal Eddy's dark shape appeared in the stall's door. He recoiled with an oath from the muzzle of the short .45. Gip snarled at him: "You make a move and I'll let a hole through you a dog could trot into! Catch hold of your ears—and hang on!"

V

GIP backed him into the stall, taking the gun from tthe shoulder holster with his left hand. He put it into his own waistband. Eddy had no other weapon. He stood quietly while Gip rasped a match on overalls-leg and raised it.

"Ah," he said then, when the small flame illumined Gip's face. "Another dam' detective, huh?"

"Who stuff's all this?" Gip demanded, indicating the saddles and bridles. "Yours and the Yogers, huh? Whose breast-collar's that?"

"Mine," Sal snapped. "If it's any o' yore business!"

Then, under the glare of the match, suspicion, nervousness, seemed to creep over the lean, dark face. The eyes narrowed.

"What d' yuh want to know for?"

"Because it was a buckle off that breast collar that was in Ligon Pravor's dead hand. Because it was another buckle from it that I picked up beyond my camp—where you all shot at me last night. Because I wanted to check the bunch of you—find out which one of you hammered Ligon Pryor to death! So it was you!"

"I don't know what yo're talkin' about," Sal Eddy snarled. "I never shot up nobody. Don't even know who Ligon Pryor is."

Gip walked him out of the stall and into that which held Button, ahead of the gun. There, with cunning turns of the lariat from his saddle, he lashed him to a post in the back of the stall. The last turn of the lariat went about his neck, holding it not too tightly to the post. He gagged Sal with his own neckerchief wadded into his mouth and held by Gip's tied about his head. Then he stood back to listen. There was no sound.

"I'm leaving you for a while. So long as you stand still you'll be all right. If you start fighting the bit, you'll probably choke. But you can put this into your pipe, Sal Eddy: Legion Pryor was my good friend. You murdered him and you're as good as dead."

Sal's thin face blanched.

Then Gip went quietly and quickly out and to the rear of Pike's store. There was one yellow window showing. Soft pounding brought a challenge from the other side of the door.

"You wouldn't know my name. But I'm the man who found Ligon Pryor's blood in the pasture and took Fenner to the place. And—Ligon Pryor was an old friend of mine."

A bar slid across the door. A sawed-off shotgun came out through the widening opening. Gip laughed.

"Don't blame you for feeling that way. But it's not necessary, Mr. Pike. I came to you for help, because you're the only man in town I know to whom I can turn. Can I come in?"

Inside, standing with the shotgun's muzzles trained wickedly upon his middle, he grinned satanically down at the storekeeper, thumb and finger of each hand pinching the shoulder-seams of his old shirt.

"The same outfit that hit here, last night, are hitting Quade's bank, tonight," he grunted. "Fenner knows about it, but I don't like his scheme because it'll mean Alvin Quade's dying. I want you to come along with me, bringing your shotgun. I think that we can account for the fellows who got your money and murdered your clerks. I am—a hard man, Mr. Pike. With my own tools, I'm an efficient man, too. There'll be five, at most, of this outfit. If they don't reach for the stars, we can easily handle them. I can!"

Pike watched Gip narrowly.

Curtly, then, he told what Fenner had told him. He added only that he had learned of the Yoger's part in it.

"So Fenner will handle Alvin's part," Pike meditated. He let the shotgun-muzzles sag. He seemed to accept Gip, now, at face value. "I wonder . . . I don't like Pate! I'm free to say he's too doddern cold-blooded an' schemin' to suit me a-tall. He aims to marry Dolly Quade. Doddern it! I believe the scoundrel'd *like* for Alvin to be killed. I'll go with you, son. An' we'll yank Tom Nunnally out o' his half-sick bed, too. He's kind o' down under, but he ain't too bad off to git into this!"

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PIKE blew out the lamp, having slipped extra shells into his coat pockets. They locked the back door and crossed a can-littered space, to knock upon another door. A dragging footstep sounded. The door was flung open. A gigantic, stooping man stood there, silhouetted against the kitchen's light.

"Tom!" Pike barked. "You git your Winchester an' some shells an' come along with me an' this boy. Alvin Quade's about to be murdered by the same outfit that hit my store. Fenner, he knows about it, but he aims to start shootin' into 'em. That'd git Alvin downed, too—an' a lot Fenner'd care, doddern his hide! He aims to slide you out o' the sheriff's office."

"I figgered that last," the old sheriff drawled bitterly. "I was a fool ever to take him on. A' right. Be with you!"

His pace was quickened as he turned away. He was back quickly, wearing a hat, carrying a double-barreled shotgun, and ramming twelve-gauge shells into his pockets.

"They've had time to pull Quade out of bed," Gip whispered. "Probably, they're in the bank by now. I'm going to slide up close and have a look. I'll come back and tell you."

He went off through the darkness with no more noise than a shadow moving. There was the bank's high, narrow rear wall, with its iron-shuttered windows. The door showed as a black rectangle against the grayish stone. He went flat upon his belly and inched toward it. There was no sound. Perhaps they had not yet got there. Then a man stepped out of the doorway, a vaguely distinguishable smudge against the moonless darkness. He went quietly away but came back. He vanished into the door.

Gip was almost up to the doorway when out of the dark on his left there came a harsh, low challenge. He hesitated, the gun wavering in his hand, then grunted most piglike.

He heard the soft footfalls of a man approaching him. Someone called softly from inside the bank. The lookout answered.

"Somebody's dam' hawg tryin' to walk in on yuh."

Two men appeared from the doorway,

now, with a dull clinking sound for accompaniment.

"Kick it out," one of the Yogers snapped. Gip recognized that voice. "We got more'n half out o' the vault. The ol' money-grabber's skeered to death, but not too skeered to sweat blood at seein' how much we got. Come on, Sebe. Set it down with the rest. Sal ought to be comin' with the hawses, right quick."

Three men outside. That meant two in the bank, or perhaps three. The lookout had not obeyed Yoger's order to kick "the pig." He had turned away with them.

GIP scrambled quietly into the doorway, then stood up. Down a wide passageway that led to the counters and cages, he saw a dim light. A man moved there. His shadow showed on a counter. Gip went on tiptoe that way. He looked around a counter-end and saw two masked men with a gray-haired, frightened-looking man beside them.

"On the floor, Quade," Gip yelled. "Flat on the floor!"

Quade toppled as if he had been pole-axed. The two men whirled, snatching at holstered guns. From outside, at the back, there was a sudden yell and the pound of running footsteps. Suddenly, out there, the air was shaken by the heavy roar of shotguns. Gip menaced the two before him.

"Stick 'em up," he yelled at these. "Stick 'em up, or—"

One let go of gun-butt and jerked his hands high. The other was a harder breed—or simply more venturesome. For he drew and he drew fast. Gip shot him down and in the flurry of the firing saw the man who had surrendered fall across Quade, who was flattened against the floor with fingernails clawing the planks. With the clatter of steps from the back door, Gip whirled. He expected to see Pike and the sheriff, but it was one of the Yogers and another man.

He had shot his pistol empty. He stooped quickly and snatched up the Colts dropped by the two masked men. He knelt and fired at the two coming in from around the counter-end. Lead sang toward him. The place was full of acrid

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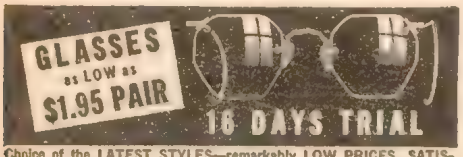

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powder-smoke, shaking with the shots thrown at him by the pair. Then a huge figure popped into the rear door. A shotgun roared. Yoger dropped. Gip shot down the man with him.

"All right, Sheriff," Gip panted. "It's all clear up here. The money's piled somewhere out back. They were waiting for the horses."

Tom Nunnally came up the passageway to look at the men Gip had dropped up there. Gip moved toward the back. He was thinking of Fenner, whose neat plan had so terribly miscarried. Pike came toward him, asking questions. A door opened in a building beyond the bank. From it came a shaft of light.

"Got 'em all," Gip told the storekeeper. "No. Quade wasn't hurt. He dropped to the floor before the fireworks began."

A MAN came running around the corner of the bank, a tall figure with a pistol in his hand.

"What—what happened?" Pate Fenner gasped. His gun-hand was shaking.

"Tom Nunnally an' me, we heard a crack was to be made at the bank," Pike drawled, looking hard at Fenner. "We brought along this young fellow an' got the whole bunch without hurtin' Alvin Quade that they had prisoner!"

"So you crossed me," Fenner yelled at Gip. "Damn your soul, Gip Drago! You—you—stick them hands up! You'll hit the jail so quick it'll make your head swim. You won't get a thing out o' this trick! I'll collect two thousand on you—"

He jammed the pistol-muzzle into Gip's side. Pike stared at them, stared from Gip's immobile face to the fury-convulsed features of Pate Fenner. He looked toward the bank doorway. Gip, watching Fenner, saw suddenly the narrowing of the smoky eyes, the lift of lip over snarling teeth. There was no doubt in his mind about what Fenner intended. . . .

"Ask Nunnally, then," he said quietly, with head-jerk toward the door of the bank. Then, as Fenner's head jerked that way, involuntarily, he slapped the muzzle of the pistol down. It roared, but the slug tore into the ground at Gip's foot. Then he had one of the captured guns out of his waist-band. The hammer dropped

and Pate Fenner crashed flat upon the ground. Pike was gaping at them. He shook his head, looked furtively right and left, then suddenly whirled upon his heel and the shotgun in his hand jumped up. He fired into the air, the empty air.

"What's up?" Tom Nunnally roared.

"Pate Fenner ran into the last man—got shot—man got away," Pike yelled excitedly. "He run over thataway!"

* * *

Something like an hour later, sitting in the back room of Pike's store, Gip looked thoughtfully across at Pike.

"You heard what Fenner called me?"

"Never heard a word," Pike said owlishly. "He certainly aimed to down you, though, doddern his murderin' hide! But if I had heard, likely I would have recognized the name. You see, Ligon Pryor told me considerable about a friend o' his who was shoved into outlawry. Well, you're goin', huh? Don't know's I blame you. An' you got to take the forty-five hundred. I offered it for them fellows an' you delivered 'em."

"If you feel that way about it," Gip shrugged, standing up.

He shook hands at the door, and went quickly to the livery corral. Peering into the box-stall, past the golden sorrel, he sighed relievedly. For there was Sal Eddy, still securely lashed to the post. Gip's mouth tightened. He moved up to the prisoner, scratching a match.

"We'll drift off to a quiet place," he said grimly. "Then we'll see who's the best man with a gun."

Something about the posture of Sal Eddy checked him.

"I'll be damned! You did try to kick free, did you? And got your foot caught and pulled the loop tight around your neck. Well—"

Swiftly, he loosed the body and carried it to that stall in which Sal Eddy had been left by the Yogers. He laid it softly down, went back and saddled. A sleepy hostler took two silver dollars from Gip's hand.

"Ridin', huh?" he mumbled. "Lord, but I'm sleepy. Yuh could've rid right by me without payin'."

"I always pay up," Gip said.

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Name ..... Age.....

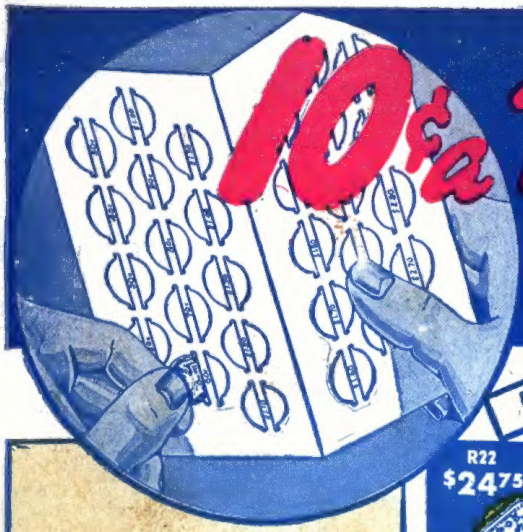
Typewritten signatures not acceptable.

Address .....

City ..... State.....

CAUTION: FOR QUICK SHIPMENT GIVE OCCUPATION AND REFERENCE.

OVER 200,000 SATISFIED CUSTOMERS ALL OVER THE WORLD



10¢ a Day buys a Watch on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

BULOVA · ELGIN · GRUEN · KENT · BENRUS

Yes—only 10c a day on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN will buy your choice of these nationally known watches. It's simple—here's how you go about it...

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine watches without burden on the pocket book or savings.

Jim Feeney

FREE TO ADULTS

A postcard brings my complete 48-page catalogue and full details on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN. No obligation.

R22 $24.75

M17 $24.75

R22 — Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. $24.75
M17—Man's BULOVA; 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate case; bracelet. $24.75
$1 deposit · $2.38 a month

L140 $37.50

S141 $37.50

L140 — Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. $37.50
S141 — Man's ELGIN—sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. $37.50
$1 deposit $3.65 a month

P143 $15.95

K166 $15.95

P143 — Ladies' tiny KENT. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. $15.95
K166—Man's KENT. Guaranteed. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case; 7 jewels. $15.95
$1 deposit · $1.50 a month

$29.75 T67

O68 $29.75

T67 — Ladies' GRUEN. 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate. $29.75
O68 — Man's GRUEN Verithin: 15 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate. $29.75
$1 deposit $2.88 a month

K273 $19.75

K273 — Service Watch — new radium dial, easy-to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Made especially for Army and Navy men.
$1 deposit $1.98 a month

$19.75 T567

O564 $19.75

T567 — BENRUS for Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K gold plate; bracelet. $19.75
O564—Man's BENRUS: 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. $19.75
$1 deposit $1.88 a month

JIM FEENEY
L. W. Sweet—Dept. 761-M, 1670 Broadway
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find $1 deposit. Send me Watch No. _____ Price $_____. I agree to wear the watch for 10 days. If not satisfied, I'll return it and you will refund my dollar. If I keep it, I'll pay balance in 10 equal monthly payments.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

L. W. Sweet

MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS, Inc.
Dept. 761-M. 1670 BROADWAY, NEW YORK